

Doing Jewish, Together

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When Bay Area Jews seek to design a bar or bat mitzvah ritual for a child, it is 80 percent more likely that they will create the ritual themselves than join a synagogue. A substantial majority of Jewish respondents in the San Francisco federation's most recent demographic study* have made it clear that existing institutions are not meeting their needs and yet they would still like to engage in meaningful Jewish opportunities. So what are their choices? They can not do the ceremony, or they can do it themselves, or they can tap into one of a rapidly growing number of projects and organizations that design innovative Jewish programs to meaningfully engage Jews in Jewish life in the Bay Area. For example, Jewish Milestones helps create unique Jewish lifecycle opportunities like a bat mitzvah at Yosemite; Wilderness Torah takes hard-core backpackers into the Mojave Desert to re-experience Passover; and G-dcast.com broadcasts the weekly Torah portion, creatively condensed into a short animated film, on the Web. These are only a few examples of a broader array of new pathways to Jewish living.

The Bay Area is decades ahead of the rest of the country in terms of its communal patterns, according to editors Ava F. Kahn and Marc Dollinger in their 2003 book, *California Jews*. When Jews moved to the West, they write, "they experienced little anti-Semitism, and gained almost immediate access to power." Therefore, they helped establish communal — Jewish and civic — institutions with other newcomers like themselves. They assimilated quickly and then dispersed, geographically, religiously, and culturally.

Like communities across the country, the Bay Area is now experiencing a resurgent interest in Jewish textual learning, cultural arts, community service, social justice, and Jewish ritual and practice. Bay Area Jewish social entrepreneurs are trying to creatively address the challenges of connecting a number of different peripheral communities: guiding young adults with small checkbooks and big passions to become philanthropists; making interfaith families feel more comfortable in synagogues; helping vegans who are deeply involved in the environmental movement express themselves through a Jewish lens; and finding places for Bu-Jews, Hin-Jews, atheist Jews, cultural Jews, and non-Jews in the Jewish community. And the broader community wonders: How can we design and support a set of communal structures that will engage these individuals and create opportunities for them to express their Jewish identities as one aspect of their multifaceted-selves?

For decades, the simplest answer for these more peripheral communities has been to avoid "doing Jewish" altogether, or to just "do Jewish" on their own. But, along with the growing demand for innovative opportunities to "do Jewish," have come more resources to "do Jewish" collectively. Our community is trying to support new initiatives so that individuals can join others in "doing Jewish," and imaginatively redefine, and thereby preserve, the internal architecture of the Jewish community.

Maya Bernstein is the director of education at UpStart Bay Area, which helps innovative Jewish organizations get started toward success, and works with existing Jewish organizations to help them re-position themselves for success in the future.

* See: <http://www.sfjcf.org/aboutjcf/localcommunity/study/>