Conversation topics include politics (especially of the "Is it good for the Jews?" variety), wellmeaning social gossip, and morally tinged family anecdotes, targeted mainly to my nephews and nieces. It's a comforting and predictable night, full of love and food.

And here is the crux of the matter. I very much belong to all three dimensions of Jewish life in Mexico: the open dialogue with non-Jewish Mexican society, the nothing-is-sacred bravado of the alternative young crowd, and the strong affiliation with religious traditions such as Shabbat dinner and old-fashioned values. I cannot explain it; I only know that these different ways of being Jewish can coexist in a single person; our lives are more complex than the narrow conceptual labels that we find in community institutions. Our community, fragmented into different sectors where each group focuses almost exclusively on its own agendas and followers, seems to lack the confidence to think differently.

I see Judaism as a constant dialogue between tradition and transformation, a maintaining of cultural and spiritual relevancy — a sense of belonging — in a changing world. We can further this dialogue by linking the various Jewish patterns in our own diverse lives and in our institutions, and by finding and connecting the array of contradictions in Jewish life.

How might we bring the alternative into the mainstream, to unite the old with the new? A couple of possibilities: a monthly minyan housed within the main synagogue, where young people are encouraged to reinvent rituals as well as the pacing and musicality of the tefillah; or a proliferation of Jewish salons, where Jews and non-Jews freely mingle to explore in a contemporary language the universal questions of Jewish culture. I know we must continue to bring our ideas — however crazy to those leaders unafraid of becoming change agents. There is a time and place (and in my case, a day of the week) for all of us.



## **Discovering My Jewish Self**

BENNY BAILEY

eing Jewish for me is a personal feeling of belonging to something bigger. Whether one chooses to treat this feeling with indifference, to keep it to oneself, or to act upon it publicly is a private decision. My own unintended Judaism eventually led me to interact with other young Jews from other countries on a community level. We started the "Jewish Salons" project to broaden our familiarity with the Jewish drama and to find its meaning in our daily lives.

Paradoxically, I connected to my Jewish self outside of Israel, as a social work student at Yeshiva University in New York. It was during discussions about immigration and minority peoples, meeting young Jews from other places and experiencing the sense of being an outsider — so unfamiliar to Israeli Jews — that my consciousness of being Jewish was awakened. One day, I stepped out of the elevator on the wrong floor and walked into the university's tiny museum. I chanced upon some 400vear-old Torah scrolls brought by European immigrants to lower Manhattan; immediately, I was taken by the powerful silent strength of these artifacts. The familiar Hebrew, the geographic odyssey of the scrolls and their role in the stories of Jewish communities, my American father, my European mother, my Israeli being — all melted into one. An encompassing sense of belonging overwhelmed me. My curiosity led me to explore Jewish history, philosophy, and the biographies of outstanding Jews. I came to recognize that if I was doomed to be socially categorized, I wanted to embrace my Jewish label; and, for all it is worth, I am proud to conceive of myself as a Jew.

Today, the dominant drama focuses on the political complexities of Israel; it sidelines other aspects of the current Jewish experience. The Jewish Salons, which I founded last year, seek to challenge this pattern. The salons — in Amsterdam, Vienna, Prague, Mexico City, and Tel Aviv — provide platforms for young adult Jews to express Jewish relevance through contemporary culture and arts. Together, we produce salon events exploring Jewish themes, blending local and global voices, refreshing the discourse in and between Jewish communities. The agenda is to expose and showcase the diversity and depth of Jewish culture as it indigenously develops, and to let that Jewish story dangle a personal Jewish animating string. Salon events are a community stage for people to experiment with and construct their personal meaning of the concept, "being Jewish."

Benny Bailey is an Israeli social worker. A specialist in the field of intimate partner violence, he monitors groups of male perpetrators in Bnei Brak. Bailey, who founded the Jewish Salons network (www.jewishsalons.net) as a result of his experiences at Yeshiva University and in KolDor (www.koldor.org), is also the owner of Caffe Tazza d'Oro in the Neve Tzedek neighborhood of Tel Aviv.