

Exodus/Sh'mot: Art as a Guide to Where We Are Going

A Nu Way Forward: Reaching Jewish Young Adults in Creative Ways

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Over and over again for 350 years one finds that Jews in America rose to meet the challenges both internal and external that threaten Jewish continuity— sometimes, paradoxically, by promoting radical discontinuity. Casting aside old paradigms, they transformed their faith, reinventing American Judaism in an attempt to make it more appealing, more meaningful, more sensitive to the concerns of the day.

Historian Dr. Jonathan D. Sarna

Anyone who is part of the secular or Jewish nonprofit sector is aware of the vast research regarding Generation Y (Millennials), Echo Boomers, and Xers. Most of this research points to current young adults (in their twenties and thirties) needing individualized approaches to encourage community involvement, fund-raising, and affiliation with religious organizations. The perception is that young adults want everything personalized, stylized, and packaged to conveniently fit their on-the-go lifestyles as evidenced by the fact that they are often called the MTV Generation or Generation Me.

How Do We Engage Jewish Young Adults?

As a young professional committed to the organized Jewish community, I have found answers to this question debated at every

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conference, via online media, in professional gatherings, and through scholarly journals. Typically, answers range from using flashy social media, planning big parties, organizing singles events, and offering freebies and/or discounts. The number-one mistake repeated at these gatherings and in much of the literature on this topic is not asking young adults to be part of the conversation about how to approach their cohorts. Often this conversation is led by seasoned professionals, historians, and researchers. It almost never includes professionals in their twenties, thirties, and forties. Often young professionals are being talked *at* rather than *to*.

When confronted with this debate, it reminds me of the improvisational game “Yes and.” An example of this would be asking the following question: Is using social media, creating fun parties, and giving discounts the way to reach out to young adults? The answer is: Yes, and you need to do more. Prices of events, decorations, and social media are a great start but more can always be achieved and experienced by participants.

Reframe the question: It is not about *how* to engage young adults, but rather, *why* do we want to engage young adults? What is motivating your organization to reach out to this cohort? In what ways is the organization willing to make the Next Gen a part of the work you do? The goal is to build partnerships, not just get people in the door. Generation Me is not just about self-service. The “Me” of this generation is also about belonging. We do not want just a cheaper ticket to party. We want to feel invested in, heard, and counted. It is about meeting us where we are and creating a joint vision moving forward. It is time to look around the community and bring young leaders to the table to help articulate/participate in these conversations in meaningful ways. Young leaders can offer valuable advice about catching the attention of their peers.

My personal desire to find new ways to engage my cohorts, give back to the regional community, and provide pathways for Jews of all ages to become culture seekers led to the development of a new initiative called Nu ART Projects. While the initial idea for Nu ART Projects was my brainchild, I understood this effort could not be achieved alone. I quickly turned to trusted colleagues and fellow graduates of the USC Roski School of Fine Arts Public Art Studies program, Daniella Gold and Kim Newstadt. Together we combined our knowledge of the Jewish art and culture community

to develop, launch, and grow this project. From the beginning, the founders wanted to emphasize that Nu ART Projects is about community. This was deeply embedded in our efforts.

Using Nu ART as a case study, I will explain our model, share our successes, and offer lessons learned. In conclusion, our model will enumerate tips for engaging young adults in meaningful ways using culture as a convening method.

Nu ART Projects [Insert Jewish Culture Here] Case Study

Nu ART [Insert Jewish Culture Here] is a project dedicated to increasing Jewish cultural appreciation through well-crafted participatory experiences. Nu Art founders recognized the need to create a new initiative that goes directly to where people are congregating and living. Thus, Nu ART uses mobile or “pop-up” experiences to engage Angelenos with quality Jewish contemporary culture. Nu ART encounters our audience where they are and pulls them into cultural happenings that expose Jewish concepts to a broad audience. Our effectiveness is amplified by using art as an innovative way to engage participants and transport Jewish culture to wherever Angelenos are congregating. Our current programming includes the SEDER Art Micro-Grant Initiative and *Halomot* (Dreams)—Through the Looking Glass. Among our projects under development is the Nu ART Mobile Gallery.

We are engaging the community with the SEDER Art Micro-Grant Initiative, which is a series of community meals committed to exploring how Jewish culture is financed and experienced communally. During these public events, all funds raised in exchange for a meal become a micro-grant awarded to an artist at the end of the event. Rather than gathering to retell an ancient story, this SEDER convenes attendees quarterly to actively participate in creating the next chapter of modern Jewish culture. Those attending the SEDER directly fund new, creative, and uniquely Jewish artistic or community-led projects meant to invigorate the Los Angeles community.

In our fast-paced society, there are an increasing variety of ways to identify as a Jew, especially for the growing number who do not affiliate with the established Jewish community. A recent study concluded, “The Los Angeles Jewish community is very spread out . . . Because of traffic and perceived cultural differences and geographic barriers, Jews in some areas rarely visit others. While

there is a downtown area that serves as a hub for some cultural events (theater, orchestral music, etc.), there is no central area that serves as a hub for Jewish life."¹ SEDER seeks to bridge this geographic disconnect by bringing Jews from all over the city together in their mutual support of the arts.

Since launching in February 2011, the SEDER Art Micro-Grant Initiative has awarded over \$3,000 in funds to four regional artists with plans for several large-scale events during 2012. We are committed to raising awareness in Los Angeles and beyond regarding the value of art in Jewish life. Our effectiveness is amplified by using art as an innovative way to engage participants. Our programming allows Jews of all ages the ability to explore, engage, and foster an increased appreciation of Jewish culture. The use of ballots to vote reflects our crowd-sourced fund-raising method. The ballots used during a SEDER event include a summary of each cultural project and a short participant survey. The survey includes questions about price of admission and the quality of the presentations. For example, was it clear how each project was Jewish and how it would benefit the community? The data collected from the survey at the first four events was very valuable. It showed that 98 percent of respondents connected to both the cultural aspects of the event and to the idea that they were helping the Jewish community.

The SEDER Art Grant is based on two secular models, Brooklyn's FEAST (Funding Emerging Artists with Sustainable Tactics) and Chicago's Sunday Soup program begun by InCUBATE. I first learned about both projects from The Creative Time Summit: Revolutions in Public Practice held on Saturday, October 9th, 2010. The Creative Time Summit is a conference that brings together cultural producers—including artists, critics, writers, and curators—to discuss how their work engages pressing issues affecting our world. The conference is broadcast live and I tuned in to the 2010 Summit. During a session featuring Brooklyn's FEAST and Chicago's Sunday Soup, I began to think how their models could be adapted for the Jewish community. Having worked in the Los Angeles secular and Jewish art community for seven years, I was deeply aware of the need to increase support for artist projects. Artists often struggle to find funding to produce work. Grants available to artists and arts organizations are often restrictive regarding who can apply and how the funds can be used. For example, many government and private foundations will not grant to individual artists and many exclude

religious or spiritual work. Thus, Jewish artists often struggle to find funds that will help launch projects or produce small-scale initiatives. Micro-grants are a great way to help artists create new projects focused on Jewish culture. Thus, many of the reasons FEAST and Sunday Soup turned to community-driven fund-raising for the arts are mirrored in the SEDER Art Micro-Grant.

SEDER understands that community participation in the grant-funding and selection process is key. Applying for a SEDER grant is intentionally simple and unbureaucratic in order to encourage broad participation. This enables SEDER to stimulate and promote experimental, critical, and imaginative practices that may not be eligible for formal funding. As a nonartist participant in the SEDER, you are choosing to join an experience that engages directly with art and community projects. Each SEDER event reminds the planning team that this process is powerful for those gathered. Young adults are looking for ways to connect and Nu ART believes SEDER provides a unique alternative to current cultural programming for Jews in their twenties and thirties in Los Angeles. As one young adult remarked, SEDER was the “most incredible Jewish event” she had ever attended.

Most importantly, Nu ART is creating a community of Jewish art patrons! Each event begins with an explanation of how the participant’s generous gift of \$18 (or more) combines with the other attendees to support the advancement of Jewish culture. Traditionally, one might think to be a patron of the arts you must be part of a foundation or a private donor placing your name on the wing of an art museum. However, anyone can fund and join in the continuation of Jewish culture. Each artist or organization vying for the funds must explain to the SEDER participants how their project will affect the regional Jewish community. This aspect has led to interesting presentations and interactive elements at each SEDER Art Micro-Grant dinner. This feeling of community and giving back inspired the first SEDER Grant winner, Will Deutsch, to join our planning team after receiving his award. The exciting element is that as our project continues to grow, so does our community. We now have participants who have been to several events, thus funding multiple works by Jewish artists. We estimate over two hundred adults have participated in our first four events. Each event excites, inspires, and reminds the participants that Jewish culture is a powerful convener of community.

Another program is *Halomot* (Dreams)—Through the Looking Glass. In Hebrew, the difference between the word for windows (*holonot*) and dreams (*halomot*) is one letter. This seems to suggest a link between these concepts. Art can expand this view. It can expose us to new worlds and uncharted landscapes. When we provide artists a chance to dream and place to experiment, anything is possible. The *Halomot* (Dreams)—Through the Looking Glass project in partnership with retail spaces, nonprofits, and private residences offers regional Jewish artists a chance to create culturally relevant and site specific work. Each display (or installation) is temporary and will be on display for two to four weeks. This project is in its pilot year. We have interest from several venues. It will launch at the Silverlake Independent JCC in East Los Angeles during the fall of 2012.

Nu ART is currently exploring a project we believe will reach a wide range of the LA Jewish community. As conceptualized, the Nu ART Mobile Gallery will be a fully functional exhibition and educational space set up inside an altered recreational vehicle (RV). This mobile art space would house installations, sound-pieces, performances, paintings, sketches, and videos. The Nu ART Gallery would create programming that extends beyond the visual arts including theatrical performances, dance pieces, poetry or literature readings, concerts, cooking demonstrations, and onetime happenings. You might find the Nu ART Mobile Gallery at a Jewish day school, a Jewish Community Center, the Jewish Federation, your campus Hillel, your local farmer's market, the beach, a community garden, an outdoor movie screening, or your next neighborhood gathering. This would be the first Jewish mobile arts laboratory to hit U.S. streets. We believe this effort can be duplicated with similar programs in other cities.

To learn more about Nu ART Projects visit our website, www.nuartprojects.com. Using Nu ART as a model, I would like to offer suggestions for engaging young adults with *kavanah* (intention). We have been successful, in part, because our model is deeply influenced by the following strategies:

- 1. Identify and Cultivate Several Key Young Leaders in Your Region**

Regardless of your overall young adult strategy, take a lesson from Jim Collins, author of *From Good to Great*, and Malcolm Gladwell, author of *The Tipping Point*. Make sure you have the

right young adult leadership in place before launching any efforts at broadening attendance. It is very important that these leaders be “tipping point” people. These people should be the connectors, the young socially savvy adults who are gatekeepers to large networks. When they endorse an event, group, or initiative, these adults give an organization immediate clout. Next Geners do not just want a crafted experience that guesses at what each of them is looking for as individuals. They want to have a part in shaping events that are an authentic reflection of what excites them about the world today.

Do not plan an ambitious series of young adult events without creating a committee or getting buy-in and planning ideas from your target demographic. Young professionals should be engaged in these conversations. In many cases, the young adult staff will be the ones actualizing these projects; therefore, they should have clear buy-in. However, turning to your youngest employees at a JCC, synagogue, or museum is not a way to ensure success. You also need to include lay leaders. The involvement of young professionals already employed in your organization should not negate the cultivation of additional leaders.

Investing in young leadership means they can offer a sense of regional support. You are creating ambassadors for your projects who will give the event, series, or initiative legitimacy among their social networks. Many managers and executives have vented about how to engage young adult leadership with statements, such as, “My organization is small and we cannot afford to create a young adult board.” This way of thinking places roadblocks preventing success. Many organizations are small or regional in scope and still have successfully engaged young adults. They think out of the box. If your institution is small and you cannot have a separate young adult board, then add a young adult position/representative to your main board. The twenty- or thirty-something perspective could energize your board activities. If adding a young leadership position to your board is not doable, then look to your extended community as highlighted below in number 2.

2. It Takes a Village—Network and Collaborate!

If your community has a Federation and synagogue, chances are it also has at least one, if not more, Jewish young adult groups. Find and nurture these partnerships. They have a budget to engage young professionals. You have a venue. If you collaborate with these groups, the possibilities for exciting programming are endless.

Beyond temples and the Federated system, there are several growing networks engaging Jewish young adults. ROI, Presently

Tense, Reboot, Six Points Fellowship for Emerging Jewish Artists, Birthright NEXT, *Slingshot: A Resource Guide to Jewish Innovation*, the Dorot Fellowship, Moishe House, Joshua Venture, and the Natan Fund are organizations that largely support a younger Jewish demographic (twenties to forties) through micro-grants, educational conferences, professional development, and major funding opportunities. Alumni of these programs are spread across the globe. They are found in small towns in the south, major cities on the East Coast, throughout Middle America, and all along the West Coast. They are entrepreneurial start-ups, often working on innovative projects that are culturally motivated. Collaborating with this caliber of Jewish young leadership can create several strategic alliances for both parties. In many cases, the opportunity to work with a museum, national university, temple museum, or gallery is exciting. The Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco has collaborated on several exhibitions with Josh Kun, professor and cofounder of The Idelsohn Society for Musical Preservation, and Roger Bennett, cofounder of Reboot and The Idelsohn Society. The Jewish Museum of Maryland used their *Chosen Food: Cuisine, Culture, and American Jewish Identity* exhibition as a way to collaborate with Kayam Farm at Pearlstone, the most active Jewish community farm in North America. Kayam engages a large network of young Jews interested in sustainability and the environment. These partnerships extended the reach of museum exhibitions to participants who would be interested in the core topic and may not have known about the museum.

Consider working with the new kids on the block! There are a growing number of independent organizations and projects led by young Jewish culture creators targeting their cohorts. The leaders of these initiatives know how to attract their peers. They are proving their social impact, and start-ups or first-stage organizations serve as perfect program partners. They are naturally innovative, attracting thought and culture seekers. Tap into their enthusiasm, creativity, and networks. Offering a venue and chance to partner can lead to exciting possibilities. Examples include: G-dcast.com; Haggadot.com; Jewish Art Now, NYC; Nu ART Projects and the SEDER Arts Micro-Grant, Los Angeles; East Side Jews, Los Angeles; JDub Records (archive of musicians), NYC; Bible Raps, Philadelphia; Bibliyoga, Los Angeles and the UK; Jewish Chicks Rock, Brooklyn, NY; Jewish Rock Radio (JRR), Chesterfield, MO; *Punk Jews: The Documentary*, NYC; Yiddish Farm, New Hampton, NY; Jewish Rock Records, Gersham Y, Philadelphia; Hebrew Mamita, NYC; First Fruits Festival, Portland, OR; Zshuk Jewish Art

Initiative, NYC; KFar Jewish Arts Center, Chicago; Art Kibbutz, NYC; A Member of Two Tribes, Los Angeles; Shemspeed and the Sephardic Music Festival, NYC and Los Angeles. International examples of culture producers include: Socalled, Montreal, Quebec; Marom, Budapest; El Toratron, Buenos Aires; Jewish Salons, Amsterdam; Oleh! Records, Tel Aviv; Look to Learn, UK; Kol HaOt, Jerusalem; and JewishCultureUK.com.

3. Mobility—Take Your Message to the Streets

Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone*, found that every ten minutes of commuting time reduces the likelihood of event attendance by 10 percent. People are more programmed now than ever before. We are more likely to skip events that require navigating traffic. If you want to get your message heard, you must go to where people are congregating. The days of waiting for participants to walk through the doors of museums, galleries, and cultural institutions and even our synagogues are waning. Repeat cultural consumers at Jewish museums is, on average, 15 percent lower than their secular counterparts. It is time to learn from secular art and cultural ventures and be willing to leave the confines of our institutional homes. Secular museums and curatorial collectives have been making their message mobile for decades. There are several innovative models available including using online technology to reach international audiences (streaming events live, creating secondary websites that expand exhibition content, or creating mobile apps), using a vehicle in order to make your collection or arts programming mobile, and creating pop-up exhibitions and events. Amazing examples of art vehicles include the Walker Art Museum on Wheels, Mobile Mural Lab in Los Angeles, and Camper Contemporary. A few examples of secular projects exploring pop-up exhibitions and happenings include InCubate, Chicago; Fallen Fruit, Los Angeles; and Phantom Galleries, Los Angeles. An ongoing exhibition of particular note is *Folk Art Everywhere*, which was organized by the Craft and Folk Museum (CAFAM), a small regional museum in Los Angeles. The exhibition as explained by CAFAM, “promotes the unique cultural and artistic landscape of Los Angeles by bringing art into unexpected spaces and celebrating all folk.” They have placed objects from their collection in secure cases at restaurants, markets, community centers, coffee shops, bookstores, and other places where people naturally gather. The museum produced a map, events, and labels that connect each object to a chosen location. Consider how incredible it would be if Jewish museums or synagogue museums/collections partnered with local shop own-

ers, Jewish businesses, Federations, JCCs, delis, and other gathering areas and linked items from their collection with each space. It could be a citywide effort to place Jewish ritual and material culture back into the community with exciting programming and endless opportunities for collaboration. There are several examples of Jewish organizations exploring mobile and transitory experiences. Rachel Jarman, director of the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience, created a wonderful interactive traveling trunk project. As explained, "The Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience Traveling Trunk is a hands-on educational opportunity containing artifacts, photographs, maps and three lesson plans to teach Mississippi students about nineteenth century European immigration to the American South and how these Jewish immigrants made an impact on their communities."

4. Social Media and Branding

If you want to catch the attention of a younger crowd, your branding needs to feel contemporary. Check out hip designs by Br&.ish (<http://brand-ish.co/>) for ideas. Most organizations are now on Facebook and Twitter. Make sure to keep these accounts active and post events on both outlets.

Also, consider old school media used in contemporary ways. If you are trying to reach the unaffiliated, try creating posters that can be placed in regional hotspots including cafes, bars, or music venues. Leave stickers or postcards in similar areas. For the very brave, create a stencil or sticker that can be applied to the area surrounding your venue. Check out the Contemporary Museum in Raleigh, North Carolina, and their sticker project.

Conclusion

Generation Y (Millennials), Echo Boomers, and Xers might desire individualized approaches regarding community involvement, fund-raising, and affiliation with religious organizations. However, Facebook and other social media sites prove that adults in their twenties through forties want to feel connected, they also want to feel that they are part of a community! Remember, "It is not what you know but who you know." In an era of social networks containing thousands of "friends," who we know and how we connect to members of our network/community matter. Nu ART, and our programming including the SEDER Art events, is successful because a group of young Jews adapted a proved secular model, capitalized on our personal networks, and gathered

other key people with large spheres of social influence. Most importantly, we literally and metaphorically welcome people into our community, provide a low barrier for inclusion (\$18), give them a seat at our table, and ask participants to actively engage in creating a shared vision. There is always an extra seat at our table for anyone interested in eating a meal and supporting Jewish art!

Note

1. Sarah Bunin Benor, "Young Jewish Leaders in Los Angeles: Strengthening the Jewish People in Conventional and Unconventional Ways," The Avi Chai Foundation, 2010.