

# CONTACT

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חברים כל ישראל / THE JOURNAL OF JEWISH LIFE NETWORK

## Jewish Unity

Essays by Michael H. Steinhardt, Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, Rabbi Saul Berman, Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg, Rabbi David Wolpe, Kyla Epstein Schneider, Maggi Gaines, and Rabbi Sara Paasche-Orlow



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Jewish Life Network is dedicated to strengthening and transforming American Jewry to ensure a flourishing, sustainable community in a fully integrated free society. We seek to revitalize Jewish identity through educational, religious and cultural initiatives that are designed to reach out to all Jews, with an emphasis on those who are on the margins of Jewish life.

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## Towards a Definition of Clal Yisrael Judaism

If it is true that all systems tend inexorably toward disharmony, then the Jewish people might be the perfect model of disorder. The theme of disharmony, of a people warring against itself, bobs through the major waves of Jewish history. The Bible itself chronicles enough sibling squabbling to fuel several lifetimes of lawsuits. At certain points in history the atmosphere became so divisive that the most salient characteristic of the Jewish people seemed to be the need to discredit other Jews. This in spite of the traditional, and oft-repeated, admonitions against slander and baseless hatred.

Seen in this light, contemporary infighting in the Jewish world should not seem particularly alarming. Yet nowadays the spirit of disharmony seems especially rancorous, the language bitter and cruel. We are so adamant about shouting our own truths that we have deafened our ears to each other. The assassination of Yitzhak Rabin sounded a clarion call to turn down the volume on the acrimony. Five years later, the atmosphere is little changed. The ideal of a pluralistic Jewish community, where opposing ideas are heard and respected, is being swept aside in the battle over legitimacy, authenticity, and personal or absolute truths.

To those who would argue that Judaism has become too splintered to maintain a core, we would like to offer an alternative view. This issue of Contact will explore the values and concerns shared by all Jews, regardless of denomination, affiliation, or location. The media overflows with tales of Jewish infighting; here we wish to remember exactly what it is that unites us. By concentrating on the forces that unify, we hope to reduce the tones of hatred and take practical steps towards renewing Jewish identity through unity.

Some might warn that to articulate core Jewish values is to dilute the tradition or, conversely, to stifle pluralism. This is not our goal. Instead, the aim is to lay the groundwork for an ongoing discussion of Jewish commonality, of root Jewish truths. Can we identify traits and beliefs that unite Jews across these seemingly unbridgeable divides? Are there areas we should focus on to encourage greater cohesion? In these pages, we will consider the binding ethics, perspectives, habits and memories that sustain Jews everywhere, and suggest ways we can use them to revitalize the community.

This is my first issue as Editor of Contact. I have spent several years working in the Jewish communities of Central and Eastern Europe, where I grew to appreciate creative and dynamic approaches to Jewish identity. In the coming months, I look forward to an ongoing discussion of the most stimulating ideas affecting Jewish life today.

*Eli Valley*  
Eli Valley

**A**merican Jewish leaders are perplexed. Our people are living in the richest country in the world, afforded an unprecedented freedom to practice our religion, accepted as never before by our non-Jewish compatriots—and yet, by and large, they are not interested in their religion, heritage and culture.

What are we doing wrong? Studies so far have pointed to shortcomings in outreach as well as to the dominant pull of American culture. But there is a larger factor that is often overlooked in our rush to assign blame. It is time we examined the structure of our community and the contents of our tradition to determine how closely they reflect Jewish life in America today.

Historically, Jews have suffered at the hands of oppressors. The history of the Diaspora is replete with instances of carnage. That the most catastrophic trauma was perpetrated in our very lifetime only reinforces our self-image as an oppressed people. Over the course of generations, then, Jewish identity was informed by persecution. Lacking exposure to the open society, Jews found strength in a life of oppression. In a socio-religious sense, the persecution “proved” that Jews were morally and culturally superior to their persecutors. The self-perception of martyrdom left an imprint on Jewish consciousness that is difficult to remove.

The climate of persecution did little to prepare Jews for life in contemporary America. When confronted, on the one hand, with a history bound up in remembered tragedies, and on the other with a present rich in freedoms, it is clear that people will choose the latter. If synagogues and Hebrew schools focus on catastrophe rather than celebration, there should be no surprise that so few American Jews, particularly young Jews, are drawn to Jewish religious life.

The fungus of remembered oppression has infested our communal bodies as well. The infrastructure of the American Jewish community was built with an eye towards relief efforts, defense against anti-Semitism, and protection against Israel’s destruction. Decades after such concerns have receded into the background of American Jewry, the community is still fueled by pogrom-riddled perceptions of human destiny. Fear continues to sustain some of the most prestigious Jewish American philanthropies today. Meanwhile, the American Jewish experience is characterized by prosperity, integration, and joy. On many levels, there is dissonance between Jewish community life and one’s own personal experience. It is no wonder, then, that a relatively small percentage of Jews are actively engaged in their communities.

Make no mistake: history has taught us that it is easier to unite people through fear than through joy. But if Judaism is to sustain itself in the open society, it must adjust to the reality expe-

# Universal Pleasures of Jewish Joy

by MICHAEL H. STEINHARDT

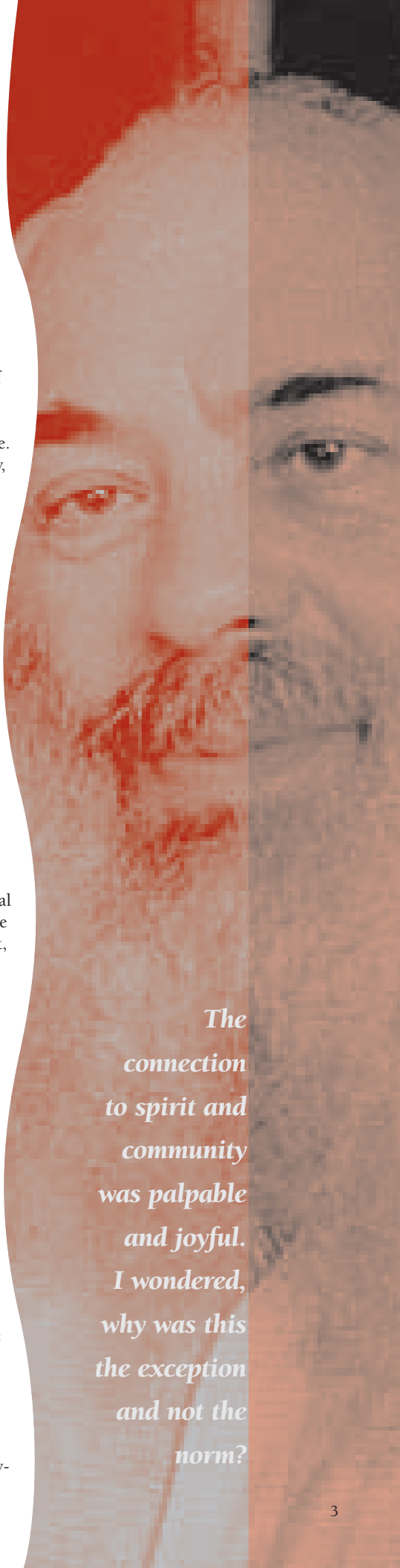
rienced by individual Jews. This reality is defined mostly by secular joy.

In America, far more of our time and energy is now within our ability to control. We have freed ourselves from the struggles of recent generations, when our main challenge was economic. Our children are progressing to a lifestyle we can only begin to hypothesize. As America experiences its greatest prosperity, people emphasize “quality of life.” Jews and others, freed from historic necessities, will increasingly concentrate on leisure, culture, and family.

It is time for us to reorient Judaism to the spirit of our age. It certainly would not be the first time in Jewish history that Jews living in a flourishing society have imitated its customs. Italian Jewish culture in the Renaissance incorporated important elements of art and literature. The Jews in the Golden Age of Spain sang drinking songs, and some of the great Hebrew poets emphasized parties and celebrations. During almost all periods of prosperity, Judaism has shown that it can guide people to a joy that is deeper, more value laden, and more humane.

Are joyous elements to be found in the Jewish tradition? Absolutely. In fact, in Biblical times all the Jewish holidays mentioned in the Torah were joyous: Passover, Sukkot, Shavuot, Shabbat. Even Yom Kippur was a happy day. Sukkot was a holiday set aside totally for rejoicing. Shabbat has a powerful primary emphasis on oneg, on the pleasure of food, family, song and dance. The Bible stresses the importance of pleasure in this world. Our task in this generation is to bring these core resources in Jewish tradition back to the fore. We must focus on the positive aspects of traditions and life rituals, and we must elevate the simcha of song, dance, and community so that Judaism is once again a religion of rejoicing in life. I am confident that a substantial number of Jews would freely gravitate toward this kind of Jewish experience.

I first met Shlomo Carlebach when he was relatively unknown. Although I had little Jewish education and very little emotional attachment to synagogue or prayer, I was stirred and enthralled by the joy of Rabbi Carlebach’s singing, and the dancing and warmth that accompanied it. The connection to spirit and community was palpable and joy-



*The connection to spirit and community was palpable and joyful. I wondered, why was this the exception and not the norm?*

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Michael H. Steinhardt is Chairman of Jewish Life Network.



ful. I wondered, why was this the exception and not the norm? There are countless ways to incorporate celebration in Jewish life.

Shabbat, for example, is not merely a day to abstain from work. It is actually a time designated for increased pleasure. The focus of Friday night is for families to eat and sing together. Modern Orthodox Jews incorporate *zemirot*, or songs, into their Friday night meals. How often do non-Orthodox families sit together, teenagers side by side with adults, to sing songs for an hour? A common complaint is that the songs are incomprehensible because they are in Hebrew. But historically, these songs were never compositions of deep learning. They were popular tunes designed to increase communal pleasure. We should devote the time and resources to creating contemporary versions of these songs, or increase educational standards sufficiently to meet this minimum standard. *Havdallah*, the closing ceremony of Shabbat, with its emphasis on sight, smell, sound, and taste, is another example of devotion to sensual pleasure. Then there is the rabbinic tradition that sex on Friday night is a *mitzvah*. Can there be more explicit evidence that Judaism is not hung up on decorum, that our religion demands we experience pleasure? Perhaps rabbis should be speaking about Jewish sexuality to publicize this *mitzvah* everywhere.

Being Jewish involves passion and emotional release. You can let your hair down, you can sing and dance. Unfortunately, we have not yet succeeded in communicating this to most non-Orthodox Jews. Thus the most frequented synagogue event is Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur, a day of abstinence, asceticism, and grief! Instead of focusing only on melancholy, we should raise celebration to the center of Jewish life. Orthodox customs can provide a useful model. The *simcha* of an Orthodox Jewish wedding is a transcendent experience of communal rejoicing. On *Simchat Torah* in Borough Park, the streets palpitate with the spirit of otherworldly joy. Already, many non-Orthodox congregations have come to infuse their Jewishness with joy. The *B'nai Jeshurun* synagogue in New York owes its incredible popularity to the joy of its Friday night services, with singing and dancing in the aisles. We should be educating “Yom Kippur Jews” nationwide of such life-affirming attitudes towards the tradition. If they don't agree with the heavy religiosity of the events, they should create secular versions—an evening of swing dancing, a concert, whatever it takes to concentrate on the fun. Indeed, why isn't our most popular holiday Purim? In Israel, Purim is a time of national Bacchanalia for all Jews, whether observant or secular.

Our community will flourish through the cohesive and life-affirming nature of Jewish celebrations. Joy is perhaps the single most powerful unifying element for Jews across the denominations. Especially in the generations after the Holocaust, it is time to show that we are no longer defined by catastrophe, that we will rise above trauma. The potential fruits of this endeavor—Jewish vitality, relevance, and unity—are too great to ignore. 🌸

**M**emory defines the human being. My recollection of past events shapes my response to new situations. Shared memories with my loved ones link me to them in the bonds of love. Memory shapes a people as well: Frenchmen remember the Bastille, Texans remember the Alamo. America has grown into a democracy and an open society because it has not forgotten that this country started as a New World open to immigrants seeking to fulfill their unique dreams.

Even in this age of Jewish polarization, there are core Jewish memories that can unite all Jews. Can these memories be identified and succinctly taught so that they belong to all Jews? Can we persuade Jews of every variety and stripe to share and internalize at least these few memories so they will stay Jewish no matter what else they identify with?

In the Middle Ages, the Kabbalists conceived such an idea. They called on all Jews to set aside a few minutes every day to remember six fundamental Jewish experiences. These six were summarized as 1. **Exodus**, 2. **Sinai**, 3. **Sabbath**, 4. **Desert Failure (Journey)**, 5. **Amalek**, and 6. **Miriam (Her Sin)**.

Almost a millennium later, the Jewish people has been fractured by assimilation, by diverse responses to the opening up of modern society, and by the acrimony between religious and secular Jews. Many Jews are ignorant of Jewish history and values. Yet, I believe that the Kabbalists' core concepts of Jewish memory can effectively serve to unify and sustain our culture today. The test of these core Jewish memories is that they show the capacity to speak to all human beings while enabling Jews to appreciate the uniqueness and depth of Jewish life.

**1. Exodus** The Jewish people came into being with an act of liberation: The Hebrew slaves were set free from Egypt. Therefore, Jewish values teach that all people are entitled to freedom. By the same token, Jews (and by implication, all people) should never forget what it means to be slaves or outsiders. Therefore, we should always act with compassion for the oppressed, the weak, and the needy.

**2. Sinai** Sinai represents receiving the Torah, the moment when the Jewish people pledged to work in partnership with God for *Tikkun Olam*, or perfecting the world. For secular Jews, Sinai represents the Jewish mission to set a higher standard individually, to be an *avant garde* collectively and to work with others to

improve society. Some might define Sinai even more minimally: It is the moment when Jews became the people of the Book, and the origin of the Jewish dedication to the values of education and self-betterment.

**3. Sabbath** The fundamental Jewish value of setting aside special time for family life and self-development. Observant Jews will focus on the elevated spirit of Shabbat, as well as on the *halacha*, or Jewish law, of Shabbat, with its prohibition of work. Secular Jews may emphasize family values or the different rhythm and pace of existence on this day. All may see in Shabbat and the holidays a taste of the better world we seek to realize.

**4. Desert Failure (Journey)** Medieval tradition continuously recalls the Golden Calf event, which serves as a surrogate for all past Jewish betrayals of God and failures in the mission. Today, this memory stands in for our culture's emphasis that no one is perfect; even our heroes are flawed human beings, not saints. With this insight come associated core Jewish values: 1) If no human system is perfect, then the good system/faith/society/government is the one that allows for dissent, free expression, and self criticism; 2) Repentance and forgiveness are essential to life and are the mark of true relationships. Minimally, the desert memory is a central, shared Jewish metaphor of life, viz., an affirmation that all humans should understand life as a continuing journey, not a fixed state. One should strive toward becoming a full human being throughout one's lifetime. In history, one never stops trying to make the planet a place of dignity and peace for all.

**5. Amalek** In Jewish tradition, Amalek is more than an aggressive nation. It is the embodiment of pure evil. During the Exodus from Egypt, Amalek launched a cruel assault on the children of Israel. Generations later, the hate-filled Haman, a descendent of Amalek, sought to wipe out all the Jews without mercy. In our time, the Nazis were heirs to Amalek's evil. Memory of Amalek goads the Jewish traditional commitment to help the weak and downtrodden. Specifically, every potential victim (not just Jews) must have access to power for self defense. This commitment turns us into seekers of an Ethic of Power, working toward a mature, inescapably flawed, but limited use of power. This approach is opposed to the ethic of pure innocence, which permeates Christian and Jewish medieval tradition. That view is outmoded because it cannot deal with a world in which aggressors have unlimited capacity to do evil.

**6. Miriam (Her Sin)** Punished by God

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*Rabbi Yitz Greenberg is President of Jewish Life Network.*

# Jewish Memory

by RABBI YITZ GREENBERG

for belittling her brother Moses, her memory speaks of the prohibition against the sin of lashon hara, or speaking evil of others. Most will find this memory the hardest to translate into a Jewish core with contemporary consensus. Some consider this standard unreal and impossible to live by. Some feminists will see this memory as tainted by sexism (the woman talks too much; why not blame her brother Aaron, whom she was gossiping with? Why was Miriam not a full, equal leader?). It is possible to re-articulate the concept as the value of the **unity of Jewry**. Thus Miriam's experience is a warning and call for the importance of not speaking evil of other Jews and their leaders, for these attacks break us apart. Turned into positive instruction, the memory teaches us that all Jews should help other Jews, and by extension all people, who find themselves in trouble.

Finally, I propose that a seventh memory be added. Seven is the classic Jewish number representing wholeness. The additional category also symbolizes that much has happened in the past century and that Judaism is an evolving civilization.

There are two possibilities for the seventh memory. One is **Remember the Holocaust**. To be a Jew is to have burned in my memory the total political and military war against the Jews. It is to remember the cheapening of life, the apathy of bystanders, the guilt of those who spread anti-Semitism beforehand, the vulnerability of democracy and law, the courageous struggle of the victims for life and dignity, the loss of a million and a half children and the death of six million. This memory sustains, nay, drives, a pledge: never again will we allow such genocidal destruction of innocents, such abandonment, such powerlessness.

The alternative seventh memory is the **Rebirth of Israel**. Israel represents the Exodus-liberation of our time, in which the hitherto persecuted Jews rose from powerlessness to power. Israel is a paradigm for the right of all people to reconnect with their roots, to live in a country where they are citizens by intrinsic dignity. Some Jews will see in Israel the living proof of Jewish unity and mutual responsibility. They will also see in Israel evidence that Judaism is a constantly evolving culture. Religious Jews will see in Israel the fulfillment of two thousand years of prayers and divine promises. Others will see in Israel the model for the economic and political liberation of the third world everywhere, especially if Israel can find peace with its neighbors and enable full dignity and participation for its Arab citizens.

Can we define these seven words—Exodus, Sinai, Sabbath, Journey, Amalek, Miriam (Unity), Holocaust (Israel) so that every Jew, regardless of affiliation, knows what they mean? Can we make them available in posters, artifacts, books, travel experience, religious ritual, secular encounter—so that almost all Jews can relate to them? If we will it, it is no dream. Such a program can establish the core of a common memory that proves again the Zohar's vision that “the people Israel, the Torah and the Holy One are one.” ❁

# Jewish UNITY *a Symposium*

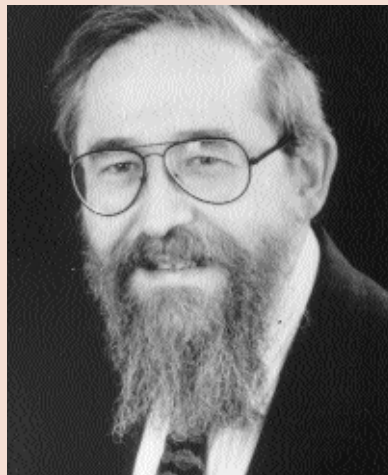
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**e asked three leading Jewish thinkers to identify that which unites Jews and the qualities we should develop in order to achieve greater unity in the future.**

**Rabbi SAUL BERMAN**

## **Common Responsibility**

*All the denominations are trying to find ways to incorporate Jewishness into people's daily lives, in their careers and in their encounters with the outside world.*



Despite appearances, Jews actually share a huge cultural heritage. The common base of Jewish actions are holidays and life cycle events, from the seder to the Bar Mitzvah ceremony. In each of these areas there is a great degree of diversity, but if instead of stressing the areas of difference we were to teach the core components that we all share, the commonality itself could serve to hold us together. The sense of responsibility for

others also finds a deeply profound expression in the Jewish psyche, regardless of denomination. This is not just because we have been an oppressed minority; it is a universal Jewish value. However, we need to work on developing a common language to express this sense of responsibility. For example, while all of the denominations are concerned about the underprivileged, some call it “social action,” whereas others call it “hesed campaigns.” The diversity of language creates a barrier because people don’t think they’re talking about the same thing when in reality they are. A common language would enhance our sense of peoplehood.

In terms of where we should be heading, a deceptively simple action would do wonders for Jewish unity: the use of a Jewish greeting. Not “hello” or “good-bye,” but “shalom.” It’s an effective, non-offensive means of preserving a sense of identification among co-religionists in

any context. A more profound undertaking could be a Shabbat candle lighting program, in which we attempt to educate even the most non-affiliated Jews that lighting candles in their homes on Friday night is an essential Jewish affirmation. The link to Shabbat is an incomparable gateway into Jewish life.

Another area in which the religious communities can work together is in how Jews engage the external world. This has taken on even greater significance with the candidacy of Senator Lieberman. All the denominations are trying to find ways to incorporate Jewishness into people’s daily lives, in their careers and in their encounters with the outside world. If the communities were to work together to focus on our common ethical and social values in engaging the world, it could have a powerful unifying effect.

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*Rabbi Saul Berman is Director of Edah, which serves as a voice for the modern Orthodox community.*



Rabbi SHEILA PELTZ WEINBERG

## Common Spiritual Wants

A common history and destiny fundamentally define the Jewish people. We are a group that wishes to preserve our unique record of struggle and search for meaning, justice and peace. We also understand ourselves as having a purpose. In order to fulfill our purpose, we call upon both the responses given by our ancestors and the wisdom of present generations.

Mordecai Kaplan devoted tremendous thought to the issue of Jewish unity. Rather than attempting to define and catalogue a list of Jewish beliefs or practices that would inspire Jewish loyalty, Kaplan argued that it made more sense to speak about a

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*Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg, the Rabbi of the Jewish Community of Amherst, leads interdenominational retreats to enhance Jewish spiritual life.*

list of common spiritual wants. By listing wants, we align ourselves to the group purpose. We are able to scrutinize our actions in the light of their intentions. We do not need to enter into the shady and murky realm of absolute truth which none of us possesses.

I think we can correlate our deepest wants with the primary stories of our heritage, namely the stories of Creation, the Exodus and Sinai. Inspired by the Creation narrative, we want a Judaism that will awaken us to how precious and unique creation is. We need a Jewish practice that will ignite wonder and reduce separation from nature and from other creatures. We need a Jewish practice that will nourish us deeply, reducing greed and insecurity. We need a Judaism that will help us to use our leisure wisely and to make clear choices about

all the earth's resources.

Inspired by the Exodus narrative, we want a Judaism that will teach, not just preach, liberation. We need help to free ourselves from inner demons (pharaohs) like depression, dishonesty, apathy, confusion, and self-hatred and external demons like economic, political and social forms of abuse and exploitation of the weak by the strong.

Inspired by the narrative of Sinai, we want a Judaism that identifies and displaces the false idols we construct and worship. Idolatry is a form of addiction that endows an individual, symbol, place, idea or substance with absolute power. Idolatry mistakes the part for the whole. We want a Judaism that can guide us in the profound personal and social endeavor toward wholeness (shlemut).



*We need a Jewish practice that will ignite wonder and reduce separation from nature and from other creatures.*

*There is something that tells us that we must be bound together. We feel it in our bones, and it runs along our hearts.*



Rabbi DAVID WOLPE

## Common Memory

A people is like an organism, it grows and changes. Just as the elements of our bodies change as the years pass, the assumptions and beliefs of a people evolve over time. There is no unvarying constant in the reservoirs of Jewish faith. The understanding of God in the time of Moses was different from the understanding of Rabbi Akiba, which was different from the understanding of Maimonides, which is different from the understanding of anyone—of whatever religious disposition—today. We do not skate on the ice of history, we bathe in its waters. We are soaked in the events and presumptions of our own time; even if we reject them, they define us. The Jews, as an historical people, should know this well.

If no single belief can bind us together, then what? Our historical experience is also varied. We may all share a common ancestor, but the Jew of Yemen and the Jew of Mexico City are

etched as much in difference as in commonality. As Jewish education slides down, we do not even share a language.

And yet, and yet. There is something that tells us that we must be bound together. We feel it in our bones, and it runs along our hearts. Division is deep, and animosity real, but it is not all.

The Jewish people is bound first by deep history. Not the history of the last hundred years, although the Shoah and the birth of the State have quickly become the central symbols of modern Jewish consciousness. Rather, we are tied together by the deeper patterns that emerge from the millennia of Jewish experience: the exodus and the entry into the land, the cycles of persecution and perseverance, the tradition of learning and our yearning to repair the wreckage of God's once pristine world.

These are more than archetypes, they are primal memories.

As Jews we not only teach our children the history of the Jewish people, we offer them a map for reading the human experience: alienation and homecoming; slavery and freedom; transcendence and idolatry; despair overcome by hope and history seeded with redemption.

For some in the Jewish community, these ideas will be more figurative than for others. No matter. Each generation, the midrash tells us, must make do with the leadership given in its own time. It does no good to pine for idealized images of leaders of the past. We too must make do with the particular fractures and failures of our own age. But so long as we bear on our hearts the template of this remarkable people, we shall not pass away.

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*Rabbi David Wolpe is a widely published author and Rabbi of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles.*



**We have been able to create a common core of respect and honor regarding our individual understanding of Jewish ideas, values and practices. This honoring of the other ... reflects the image of God found within each of us.**

**I** teach a weekly women's study group. Each Thursday afternoon for the past three years, we have met in a small suburban synagogue to learn together. We range from thirty-something to seventy-ish. We come from a multiplicity of backgrounds, represent a wide range of ideological and denominational stances and engage in various levels of personal observance. We are novice and experienced Jewish learners. What unites us is the shared table of Torah study and the common language of learning we have generated.

Why these individuals originally came together to learn is varied and complex: from personal spiritual journeys to the warm camaraderie of a women's group, from the need to find meaningful Jewish responses to the complicated scenarios of modern life to the desire to find God in Torah. Though our topics change and the faces around the table occasionally change as well, my overwhelming sense is that we now meet because we have met one another on a deeper level. When we learn together, we cultivate an ongoing, mutual relationship with our text and with one another. Even more so, the act of learning reflects our historic emphasis on communal life and intellectual inquiry. Torah study is the bond that pulls the most dissimilar Jews together in its grasp.

Through our learning, we are becoming more comfortable being uncomfortable, no longer in such desperate need of a single answer. Ambiguity and multiple truths haunt us, but they don't make us duck tail and run. We take each other more seriously. We listen more carefully. We search for the image of God within the other before we respond critically. Although we often vehemently disagree, so far no one has stopped coming to class because she felt that there was no place for her at the table. Rather than dividing



# Jewish Learners:

# Uniters of Worlds

by KYLA EPSTEIN SCHNEIDER

us, the multiplicity of viewpoints around our table has become a unifying force by pushing us into an encounter with others. We have been able to create a common core of respect and honor regarding our individual understanding of Jewish ideas, values and practices. This honoring of the other is, indeed, a primary Jewish value and reflects the image of God found within each of us.

Our study has impacted the way we think about ourselves and each other. It has not only informed the way we make decisions about our lives and our families' lives; it has also potentially changed the way we interact with other Jews within our smaller and greater communities.

Such learning has the power to create a universe of discourse through which we might communicate differently. It asks us to attempt to transcend our everyday (and sometimes perfunctory) relationships with one another in order to come to a common table. The texts themselves demand that we utilize the wealth of our collective thinking and leave our parochialism at the door. This learning often creates an environment or space to which we've invited the Divine, and it helps us to metaphorically stand when the text walks in. No matter what our particular backgrounds might be, learning can inspire us to whisper, "kadosh, kadosh, kadosh" in response to the beauty and awe of a text as we strive to hear God's voice.

Put simply, *limud torah*, the study of Torah, creates relation. Relation, in turn, cultivates common language. That language gives birth to dialogue. Dialogue unites worlds.

We are commanded "*laasok b'divrei Torah*," to be engaged or busy in the study of Torah. Why? For me, it is precisely this creation of "relationships" between God, our texts, and ourselves as learners that characterizes the learning of

Torah as a religious act. What is religious about such relationships? They demand active responsibility and response. Therein lies the possibility of holiness.

If so, what, if any, is the religious responsibility of the learner? This is a marvelously complicated question which evokes many responses. But a main response is that those who are actively involved in Torah study are responsible to be ambassadors of relationship committed to continued dialogue and exchange. A learner can become a uniter of worlds. Consider the following, for example, as ambassadors of relationships:

A person who reads a Torah fax on Friday morning, and then communicates it to another individual, increases and expands Jewish relation.

An internet surfer who peruses Jewish sites, learns on a listserve, or sends links to friends, enlarges the circle of dialogue.

A communal organization, synagogue or agency that begins a meeting with a short *d'var Torah*, or Torah interpretation, and then transcribes the learning into the minutes, ups the ante for Jewish interaction.

Jewish teachers, rabbis, cantors and educators who begin their studies with a blessing regarding study and learning, and who teach and challenge their students to continually bring concrete pieces of learning to their families and friends, wrap their classes and congregations in an embrace of relationship.

Jewish community publications and newsletters that include a passage of the week, month, or quarter extend the language of Jewish relationship to their constituents.

Parents and grandparents who bring Torah to the dinner table (and the car-pool and the homework desk) extend the relationship like ripples in a pond.

My study group is but a snapshot of vital Jewish learning around the country.

I believe that many others have shared the experience of profound relationship-building that Jewish learning provides. Our challenge is twofold: 1) How do we reach those who are currently untouched by Jewish learning; and 2) How do we help learners believe that they are authentic ambassadors of relationship and unifiers of worlds?

עֲשֵׂרָה שְׂוֹמְבִין וְעוֹסְקִין בַּתּוֹרָה  
שְׂכִינָה שְׂרוּיָה בֵּינֵיהֶם.

*When ten come to sit and immerse themselves with words of Torah, Shekinah is in their midst.*

—Pirke Avot (*Ethics of The Fathers*), 3:7

Our sages view Torah study as a communal endeavor. This text tells us that ten is an operative number of souls. Such a minyan provides a critical mass—no doubt at least fourteen opinions. Where do ten souls sit? The image that comes to mind is a large table with a seat for each. There is space for "*os'kin*," engagement, and my sense is that the immersion is interactive. Multiple lines of communication crisscross each other as the dialogue bounces off the text and back again amongst the ten. Imagine the possible configurations of communication at that table! How could God not be in attendance?

We have the obligation to use our existing tools and to develop new tools as vehicles for nurturing and cultivating relationships between ourselves, our texts and the Divine. Only in that way will we impress upon our diverse Jewish population that *limud Torah* has the potential to move, impact, engage and unite our many worlds. ✨

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*Kyla Epstein Schneider is engaged in various Jewish educational initiatives on the local and national level. She and her family reside in Cleveland, Ohio.*

# UNITED WE SERVE

## A Call To Universal Jewish Service

by MAGGI GAINES and RABBI SARA PAASCHE-ORLOW

**W**e have reached a turning point in American Jewish history. Now that large segments of our community are living successful, integrated lives, we have an opportunity to align ourselves behind service to enrich Jewish life and to effect prophetic change in the world. In *Pirke Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers), Rabbi Tarfon admonishes us, “You are not obliged to finish the task, neither are you free to desist from it.” The usual interpretation is that our task is bigger than any of us in terms of the quantity of work that must be done. Rabbi Tarfon’s dictum, however, also refers to the complexity of the task. We come to understand the critical interdependence of individuals, each bringing their own skills and varied

close friend die from the disease. A fully unaffiliated Jew might find himself playing piano weekly at the local Jewish old age home where his father suddenly finds himself living. We are all connected, and we are all engaged, or should be engaged, in crucial parts of the task. This is an essential message of Judaism.

Recognizing our interdependence will go a long way towards reinforcing the ethic of Jewish unity. None of us can serve in every way, but each of us can do our part and appreciate the ways others are contributing to the larger picture. In *Hesed in the Bible*, Nelson Glueck elaborates on the concept of *hesed*, or kindness. He states, “*Hesed* is the real action of *brit* (covenant).” When we behave in ethical

them to respect and value one another.

PSALM: Partnership for Service and Learning Movement is a new partnership initiative founded by Jewish Life Network to increase and improve service and volunteerism by Jews in America. Based in Baltimore, Maryland, PSALM will serve as an advocacy center for the essential Jewish value of service. In addition, PSALM will use Jewish learning to enrich service activities. By creating models for effective service, producing curricular and programmatic materials, and supporting quality existing programs, PSALM will elevate the ethic of service and help transform the culture of American Jewry.

PSALM will emphasize service that is not based on any one movement’s ideology and does not assume a particular Jewish background or knowledge. By creating a service advocacy center that equally values the many ways that *hesed* is expressed, we will bring this broad perspective to generations X and Y.

PSALM is premised on the idea that service is a value that extends to all corners of Jewish America. We must shore up the value of service and pass it on with strength to future generations as a keystone of Jewish identity. The covenant is perceived in a multitude of ways, but there can be agreement on the basis by which it must be fulfilled. It requires people to step beyond their own lives to take on responsibility for others.

This month we are releasing a new study on community service and Jewish identity conducted by Steven M. Cohen of Hebrew University and the JCCA Research Center. The results suggest that volunteering is widespread among Jews in their 20’s and 30’s (75%). The results also indicate that those who volunteer in a Jewish context have higher levels of affiliation and are more likely to give more *tzedaka*. This is not to say that volunteering resulted in these other behavioral traits, but it does suggest that community service is one pillar of a healthy, vital Jewish identity. By creating more compelling Jewish options for service, we provide avenues for Jews to express and strengthen their Jewish identity. In doing so, we will establish a unifying venue through which all Jews can come together and work for the common good. 🌸

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perspectives to accomplish our people’s role in the covenant.

Writing a check for *tzedaka* is not enough. We are called upon to act. Jews in America are involved in a vast array of volunteer and service commitments. While varied, our involvements are linked together and overlap like the strands of dough in a challah. For example, many secular Jews are deeply committed to ending world hunger, Tibetan persecution, or ozone depletion. These people have Jewishly-affiliated friends who are involved in the same causes but who are also addressing issues of Jewish poverty, rescuing Jews in peril around the world, and supporting the peace process in Israel. Some of these Jews have other Jewish friends who volunteer solely within a Jewish context: to end domestic violence in the Jewish community, to serve on the *Chevra Kaddisha*, or Burial Society, of their community, or to raise money for their Yeshiva or Day School.

The patterns of behavior are often even less neatly defined. An Orthodox Jewish lawyer volunteering primarily within the Jewish community might find herself doing pro bono work for the American Cancer Society after having a parent or

ways toward other people, we engage in the covenant with God. Glueck also states that in the prophetic emphasis on *hesed*, the community expands to become humankind.

How can we begin to unite as a people in our acts of *hesed*, in our volunteerism and in the service that we do? More traditional Jews must embrace a definition of *gemilut hasadim*, or acts of kindness, that includes the sanctity and social significance of deeds that serve all humanity. Secular Jews must come to appreciate the essential importance of the deeds that sustain the physical and spiritual well-being of the Jewish people.

The social and cultural distinctions between secular, religious, and observant Jews are expressions of our rich diversity, but these divisions can frustrate our collective capacity to accomplish *tikun olam*—repairing the world. Service projects that appeal to Jews from a range of backgrounds will bring individuals together who might otherwise have little opportunity to interact with one another. Through shared experiences, they will gain a heightened sense of mutual understanding and knowledge, ultimately leading







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*ven in this age of Jewish  
polarization, there are core  
Jewish memories that can unite  
all Jews. Can these memories  
be identified and succinctly  
taught so that they belong to  
all Jews? Can we persuade Jews  
of every variety and stripe to  
share and internalize at least  
these few memories so they will  
stay Jewish no matter what else  
they identify with?*

—RABBI YITZ GREENBERG