

S3KReport



A Publication of the S3K Synagogue Studies Institute

www.synagogue3000.org November 2010 Number 9

Noa Kushner

“doing jewish stuff” - an experiment called NITA

I am sitting at the Tea Pod, a modern cafe in Marin, California ready to report for my job: growing Gen X Jews. I don't know anything about the person I am about to meet except for her name (Tricia) and that she was cool with the idea of meeting with a rabbi (me).

In the past year, I have spent most of my rabbi-time having coffee with 30/40-something Jews, and I have made it my business to meet with the very people who are not members of a Jewish organization. It's a switch, and one that's not lost on me: The same people whose calls I previously treated as my lowest priority, these are the very people I now pursue, these are the calls for which I wait.

Tricia tells me a pretty common story. She was raised with something Jewish, but not anything compelling enough for her to make the choices to live a Jewish life as an adult. She is married to someone who is not Jewish (or, in other cases, someone who is born Jewish but uninterested), and she has young kids. She knows that being Jewish is an unresolved part of her life, but has not had the energy or literacy to create or find what she wants Jewishly. Her Jewish experiences until now have been primarily neutral

to negative, but since she is willing to sit with me, I can assume that somewhere, there is an open door. Somehow, over the course of an hour, I might be willing to make the case to her for doing some Jewish stuff.

Welcome to my rabbinate: one part sales, one part emunah (faith), and one part chutzpah – a stubborn refusal to give up on my generation of Jews.

In fact, my new rabbinate is heavily based on this refusal: I believe the fact that Tricia and so many others have never been in the synagogue is not an incontrovertible indicator of their lacking Jewish potential. Nor is it a blanket condemnation of the synagogue. Rather, Gen X's less than enthusiastic response to synagogue life simply points to the fact that a new generation needs to figure out how do Jewish on its own terms, in its own way.

The Context: Marin County

Marin is a central address for disaffected Jews. Our recent Jewish population study ¹ reports that only 39% of all in-married couples and 12% percent of intermarried couples belong to a Jewish organization. Since 75% of all Marin couples are intermarried, it is no surprise that the large majority of Marin Jews are disconnected from any organized Jewish community experience whatsoever. Marin's general culture can be correctly characterized as anti-institutional with a heavy focus on individual spirituality. But, the trends we encounter here to a great extent also characterize Jewish life in the rest of the country, especially those in Gen X and younger.

With this in mind, in June of 2009, Congregation Rodef Sholom received funding from Synagogue 3000 to create Nita (Hebrew for, “We will plant, we will grow”), a project that aims to connect Gen X to doing Jewish. In the three months since we began Nita, my assumptions around affiliation, and around what compels people to pursue Jewish lives, have been seriously challenged.

Contents

The Context: Marin County	1
Unpacking the Baggage.....	2
The Problem with Membership	3
To Join nor Not to Join.....	3
Who Pays for This?.....	5
Independent Revenue Stream.....	6
Voluntary Gifts	6
What Next?	6
End Notes.....	6

Sidebars

About the Author	2
Publications of Synagogue Studies Institute ...	2
Synagogue 3000 Team	5
S3K Board of Directors.....	5

About the Author

Noa Kushner is the founding rabbi of Nita, (www.nitamarin.org) a project of Congregation Rodef Sholom. She graduated from Brown University and was ordained from the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. She was the rabbi for Hillels at both Sarah Lawrence College and Stanford University. Her essays have been published in several books including *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*. She is married to Michael Lezak and they have three daughters, Zella, Bluma, and Minna.

Publications of the Synagogue Studies Institute

Members and Motives: Who Joins American Jewish Congregations and Why by Steven M. Cohen, Fall 2006

Synagogues That Get It: How Jewish Congregations are Engaging Young Adults by Tobin Belzer and Donald E. Miller, Spring 2007

Preliminary Findings 2007 National Spiritual Communities Study by Steven M. Cohen, Elie Kaunfer, Shawn Landres and Michelle Shain, Fall 2007

Synagogues and Social Justice: Creating Sustainable Change Within and Beyond the Congregation by Nancy T. Ammerman, Mark Chaves, and Richard L. Wood, Fall 2007

How Spiritual Are America's Jews? by Steven M. Cohen and Lawrence A. Hoffman. Spring 2009

Spirituality at B'nai Jeshurun: Reflections of Two Scholars and Three Rabbis by Ayala Fader and Mark Kligman, November 2009

Rekindling Tradition as Life Partnerships End by Kathleen E. Jenkins, January 2010

Download these reports at
www.synagogue3000.org/s3k-reports

Round One: Unpacking the Baggage

Nita began our first year with offering evening high holiday services. While not the most low key beginning, we knew this was a time of year when many Jews are looking for a home. Of course, we made these services extremely easy to attend. We asked simply for names and e-mails. We did no advertising, and just had a very basic (but well designed) website. We were thrilled not only with the high turnout (standing room only by Kol Nidrei), but more importantly with who was there. Although I had already been a rabbi for seven years in Marin, I knew few people in the room. We were reaching a new group of people, one we could now continue to engage.

After high holidays, I extended individual invitations to the 350 people who attended services. As many as half would eventually take me up on the offer and I found almost all our conversations extraordinarily meaningful. I was surprised at how many people told me they had wanted to talk to a rabbi for years, but just had not done so. And I was also surprised at how many tears were shed in these first-time meetings. Those with "Jewish baggage" (unresolved negative feelings around being Jewish) needed someone to hear them out and to address their experiences.

Only 39% of all in-married couples and 12% percent of intermarried couples belong to a Jewish organization.

These were thoughtful people. It literally took one hour for many to go from angry or confused by the Jewish community to wanting back "in" on doing Jewish. Obviously, not all instantly showed up at all Nita events. However, in many instances, an internal shift took place. They went from being "negative" about doing Jewish to being "open" to potentially doing Jewish.

From my experience with these conversations, I am convinced that personal meetings with qualified Jewish teachers are essential if those who are disaffected or disconnected Jews are to ever find their way to a Jewish community of any sort. The reasons these people do not show up often have little to do with the current program, the feeling in a given community or institution, or its reputation. Rather, they have more to do with a bad personal experience (or lack of experiences) from years ago. Without addressing the personal past, many of these people will not participate in the communal present.

But, of course, it's not just personal frustrations and inhibitions that keep people away from Jewish life, but cultural obstacles as well. Northern California culture, probably even more than American society in general, favors pluralism and diversity over tradition. Our local culture carries with it a general suspicion of western religion, and of being "religious." Being

or “doing Jewish” can be like swimming upstream. Doing Jewish is not supported generally the way, say, buying food from the farmer’s market or exercising is. And this cultural bias is often lost (as is often the case) on those who live here. With all the talk of acceptance, we don’t realize that doing Jewish is actually fairly subversive.

For example, I met with Jenny, an extroverted, social connector at a French café. She seemed to know everyone who walked by as she enthused about her long ago Jewish camp experience on the coast (obviously, more Jewishly socialized than most people with whom I met). She loved Havdallah, although she had not participated in a Shabbat ritual for years. When I suggested that we do a casual Havdallah at her house and that she invite some friends, she paused. “Why does that feel strange to me?” She asked. “I invite people over all the time for political causes and social things. But, for some reason, doing something Jewish at my house and inviting people feels weird. Why is that?” Some of it, I told her, has to do with the local culture. She agreed with me that if we asked people about the idea of going to gay pride parade, the vast majority would respond positively. “And what about a Jewish pride parade?” I asked. Her look said it all: It was pretty hard for her to even imagine one.

I am convinced that personal meetings with qualified Jewish teachers are essential if those who are disaffected or disconnected Jews are to ever find their way to a Jewish community of any sort.

Within the Jewish community we talk a great deal about the importance of building relationships with developing Jews. However, our organizations

are not always set up to do this. Building relationships takes loads of time and money. But I learned first hand that if the goal is engaging people to try doing Jewish, no program, no music, no building, and no website can substitute for a Jewish teacher seeking people out where they are, understanding the local climate, modeling doing Jewish in real time, and initiating one-on-one conversations.

The Problem with Membership

Many of the people I met perceived that their participation in Jewish communities without formal membership is unwanted. (Some within the Jewish community might argue that this perception and its implication are both valid!) In Marin, with its premium on independence, and where words and phrases like “institution” and “organized religion” carry negative connotations, the idea that one needs to join something in order to participate in it, simply works against connecting with these people.²

The “become a member first” approach is highly problematic in several ways. Before I worked on Nita, I thought that those who did not become members of Jewish institutions did not really want to commit to Judaism, or that they simply did not want to spend the money. However, I now see the issue differently.

To Join or Not to Join

When the suburban synagogue was created, it was part of a larger cultural backdrop of joining and affiliation. Being a part of a religious or cultural organization was not only the norm, it was a self-marker, a way to show status in the community, and define one’s reputation.³

Today, few in Generation X derive the same social benefit and affirmation by joining organizations. Rather than put all their eggs in one affiliation basket, Gen X-ers see themselves as a part of a wide range of groups. Identity is made up of a collage of different involvements, purchases, and relationships. What was once primarily static (“I belong here, this is who I am.”) is now fluid (“I do a lot of stuff today, I may do different stuff tomorrow.”).⁴ I’ve found that the number one reason for not “joining” a synagogue has as much to do with a discomfort around joining as it does with the synagogue itself. The very idea that in order to participate, a person needs to sign on the dotted line, is a steep barrier.

Those who might well be ready to do something Jewish, are not always ready to *be* increasingly Jewish. In other words, by framing Jewish participation as something that requires an a priori identity commitment or shift, (“you need to be a synagogue member to participate,”) we may

be posing unnecessary obstacles. For Generation X, membership is not just a financial commitment; it also communicates something about identity. Money aside, by making membership a pre-requirement for doing Jewish, we are inadvertently asking for something many are loathe to give. Although every synagogue provides financial assistance, this practice does not resolve the central problems around resistance to affiliation – even if the financial price is right. So what could be another way of doing things?

By analogy, if yoga studios asked people to become yogis as a condition for taking classes, those studios would lose much of their popularity. But yoga is marketed as something one can just do; it doesn't necessitate an identity shift. As a result, people feel comfortable trying it out. Of course, once they try it, some continue in their yoga practice and it becomes a part of their lives. The same operative principle is true for us – if we want people to grow Jewishly, we need to encourage them to do Jewish first.

For example, through Nita, I started meeting with Diane, a non-Jew who was married to a Jew. Diane and her husband have two school-aged children and she decided over a few months to convert. When I asked her about joining the synagogue, she demurred, not because of the financial obligation, but because she did not see herself as a “synagogue member” yet (!). For her, as for many others, becoming Jewish is an emerging, fluid process that grows over time. Becoming a synagogue member, however, is another story. It connotes a one-step, permanent shift that may not have transpired.

We need to move beyond such fixed categories as “member” or “non-member,” and “identified Jew” or “non-Jew.” Even the usual approach of counting the number of “active members” in a community can be misleading. A putatively “non-active” person may easily be engaged in a critical life-changing evolution, just as “active” members can be emotionally sequestered or in the process of detaching. If we want Jewish life to grow, and if we want our measurements of that growth to mean something, we will need to find a way to also emphasize the dynamic as well as the static dimensions.

Here, we have a lot to learn from Chabad. In theory, Chabad helps anyone Jewish to do mitzvot (even those “non-Jews” who carry the Jewish seed, by virtue of birth to a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother). While their view of Halakha (Jewish law) is strict and traditional, when it comes to organizational affiliation, there are almost no

clear boundaries for Chabad. They do not care if a participant is a “member” of Chabad, in fact, they do not even have members.

If progressive Jews were to combine our religious commitment and our modern approach to being passionately Jewish with Chabad's tremendously flexible approach, we could transform the current Jewish landscape. To this end, like Chabad, Nita does not necessarily put a higher premium on those who want to come to a Nita program over those who prefer doing something in their home. Either way (or certainly both) is great.

On a related matter, Nita's communication style is purposefully irreverent; but, the “Jewish stuff” we offer is hardly radical. One can easily find Jewish experiences far more experimental within a twenty-mile radius. Nita began with a focus on

Shabbat and we hold some kind of Shabbat event 2-3 times a month. The feeling is definitively informal, but our prayers are in Hebrew,

and the text of our service would be hard to distinguish from that in many other places around the country. A typical Nita month would include: (1) a Havdallah house party where we would close Shabbat with a generally large group of people invited by the host; (2) pop-up Shabbat, an informal, rousing Kabbalat Shabbat service followed by a take out feast (all people responsible for either bringing or ordering / paying for their own food); (3) a Storah telling Shabbat morning where families get together to pray for Shabbat morning and engage in an interactive rendition of that week's parsha. Our focus is on presenting a compelling, relevant Jewish experience through a presentation and language that resonates. Rather than radically changing Jewish content, ours is primarily an exercise in the translation and change in ownership of that content.

Looking towards the future, we can imagine a model where Nita provides the teachers for a participant-directed experience. This way, we imagine we can potentially encourage more people to learn more Jewish stuff, because a decentralized model allows for an unlimited amount of simultaneous events drawing from an unlimited amount of existing social capital. Whether all these people do Jewish

Looking towards the future, we can imagine a model where Nita provides the teachers for a participant-directed experience.

all within the same four walls, or within the same program, or even within Nita is not the question. Ultimately, our success will be measured by the number of people who substantially grow their Jewish lives. This growth already has the potential to happen in an almost infinite variety of places and circumstances. It is now our job to create (or rediscover) a Jewish model that can do the same.

That's Nice: Who Pays For This?

My father is also a rabbi. He served a congregation for almost thirty years. Although he is overwhelmingly supportive of me and my work, when we talk about my work with Nita, he always ends our conversation by saying the same thing: "That's nice. Who pays for it? Because until you figure that out, you haven't really changed anything."

I am increasingly confident that Nita is an effective, efficient, and honest way of sincerely engaging people in Jewish life. But, if we cannot generate the funding necessary to run it, then it is not a sustainable path for me or as a model for others. When I first started thinking about Nita, I was cautioned by many of my contemporaries who had founded new Jewish projects several years ago, in an easier economic climate, one that enjoyed a great deal of enthusiasm for new Jewish ideas from private donors. My friends warned me against overly depending on funding from foundations. I heard many stories about steep competition, of good ideas that could not continue or went unfunded. Further, while Nita currently has one-year grants from Synagogue 3000 and The Richard and Rhoda Goldman Fund, we are hard-pressed to meet our relatively small budget. While Nita enjoys being a project of Congregation Rodef Sholom, in this economic climate, Rodef Sholom cannot currently shoulder all the extra costs of Nita.

Like many non-profit start ups, we are extremely careful about our spending. Our budget reflects our mission and emphasizes staff and teachers. Like many other new Jewish projects and communities, we do no advertising, utilize minimal office support, and do everything online. We meet in homes, community centers and outdoor venues. We have no maintenance staff or front office. Our overhead is tiny. Almost all our funding goes directly into generating opportunities for staff and participants to connect with doing Jewish.

However, even our small budget ultimately requires income. And this brings me back to my father's question: "That's nice. Who pays for this?" In other words, if membership is not the answer for Gen X, and Nita cannot depend on foundations or congregations to support us, how can we pay our bills? We have some ideas:

Synagogue 3000 Team

Merri Lovinger Arian

Director of Music and
S3K Consultant on Liturgical Arts

Professor Steven M. Cohen

Director of Research

Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman

Co-President

Rabbi Jill Perlman

Engagement Communications Consultant

Rabbi Aaron Spiegel

Chief Executive Officer

Dr. Ron Wolfson

Co-President

Rabbi Jessica Zimmerman

Director of Congregational Engagement

S3K Board of Directors

Rabbi Aaron Spiegel, Chair
Terry Rosenberg, Vice Chair
Marion Blumenthal
Larry Cooley
Rabbi Rachel Cowan
Don Friend
David Gottlieb
Rabbi Richard Jacobs
Forrest Krutter, Secretary
Mark Schlesinger
Laurence Smith
Melanie Sturm
Beryl Weiner, Treasurer
Bruce F. Whizin

Independent Revenue Stream

For high holidays this year, we created a Nita “do Jewish stuff” kit. It was essentially a tangible piece of our mission: a kit of Jewish tools for doing Jewish anytime, anywhere. It included a hot pink mezuzah and instructions on how to have your own mezuzah putting-up party, a Nita rolodex (6 hand-picked Jewish organizations we thought everyone should know), a cell phone sleeping bag so you can turn off your phone on Shabbat and tuck it in (a Reboot project), and more. For a donation of \$118, we gave people this kit. While we did not charge for high holidays, we asked for this donation (and gave the kit) for anyone who requested to come. We raised \$10,000.

We are very proud of these kits. They were the culmination of months of work and are highly designed and edited. Our hope is to sell our kits nationally. While we do not anticipate that the profits from these kits would be able to cover our whole budget, we are hopeful that we can make a significant dent. We also believe in the idea of continuing to expand on our “brand” of “Jewish stuff” and are working on other ideas, a proposal for a Nita prayerbook game / iPhone application.

We question whether we can generate enough income from these ideas and others to warrant the amount of time we spend developing and producing them. The ideas are in keeping with our mission, but the question is: will the income be enough? And, will we be able to depend on it in years to come?

Voluntary Gifts

It will be interesting to see if those who engage with Nita will also eventually be willing to pay for their experiences. Other emerging communities (Mission Minyan) in the Bay Area (without staff) have raised some monies for materials like a Sefer Torah. If we are able to demonstrate that a Jewish experience is something to be valued, will that also lead to contributions?

Some groups (Kavana in Seattle) use a partial “fee for service” model, where people can pay at the door. This model has the advantage of generating contributions and covering costs. It also sends a clear message to participants that spiritual and Jewish events, just like secular events, also cost something.

Perhaps there will be a way to create a significant voluntary gift system that is not then equated with a “membership.” Chabad and other organizations are able to run primarily on voluntary gifts from participants; so do Christian churches. We hope that along with an independent revenue stream, these gifts could be enough to run a project like Nita.

In my mind, ultimately, the question of “Who pays for this?” is not only a question of basic financial responsibilities; it is also the question of ownership. Sure, we will need to cover our budget. More importantly, however, Nita will succeed only if the “unaffiliated” we now target eventually demand rich Jewish lives and experiences on their own. Ultimately, this ownership, not any one affiliation, is our only goal.

What Next?

At the end of the day, as many generations have already done, Nita is simply our attempt to take “doing Jewish” and intertwine it with the realities of our local place and our moment in time. It will not be right for everyone, but it already has reached hundreds of people who were not part of the Jewish conversation. Its approach will not be right forever, but if we are successful in meeting our significant challenges, if we respond with innovation and flexibility, if we are diligent in our work and stubborn enough in our belief that there is Jewish potential here and now, we might grow something relevant and compelling in this generation. And if we are blessed, we might even help to inspire the next Jewish moment, and give rise to the ideas that have yet to be born.

End Notes

¹ Bruce Phillips, 2004 Jewish Community Study (Sonoma, Marin, San Francisco, San Mateo and northern Santa Clara Counties).

² Lawrence A. Hoffman, *ReThinking Synagogues: A New Vocabulary for Congregational Life* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2006): pp.192-3.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 192-3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 192-3.

About Synagogue 3000 (S3K)

Synagogue 3000 is a catalyst for excellence, empowering congregations and communities to create synagogues that are sacred and vital centers of Jewish life. We seek to make synagogues compelling moral and spiritual centers – sacred communities – for the twenty-first century. Our offices in Los Angeles and New York direct national congregational networks and the Synagogue Studies Institute. Sacred communities are those where relationships with

God and with each other define everything the synagogue does; where ritual is engaging; where Torah suffuses all we do; where social justice is a moral imperative; and where membership is about welcoming and engaging both the committed and the unaffiliated. We wish to change the conversation about meaningful Jewish life in our time.

Synagogue 3000

New York Indianapolis
One West 4th Street 1075 Broad Ripple Ave., #216
New York, NY 10012 Indianapolis, IN 46220
tel 646.783.1978
fax 646.783.1957

www.synagogue3000.org
info411@synagogue3000.org

S3K Synagogue Studies Institute

Synagogue 3000
1075 Broad Ripple Ave #216
Indianapolis IN 46220

