

## Jews in the Woods

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by Lev Nelson,

Brown University's bay-side Haffenreffer Estate has never seen anything quite like Jews in the Woods. In early November, close to 70 "fruity Jews," current college students or recent alums, descended on the one-room lodge to form a tight-knit community in search of an intense Shabbat experience. The result was pretty spectacular.

What exactly is a fruity Jew? The category seems best defined by a list of characteristics. Fruity Jews are some or all of the following: pluralistic, progressive, community-oriented, open to new experiences and people, creative, environmentally conscious, and energetic. Of course, being Jews, the precise meaning of any of those terms is up for debate.

There were not organized activities so much as an organically flowing Shabbat. Friday night began with yoga, then Kabbalat Shabbat and maariv--with a three-part mechitza and spirited song and dance--followed by dinner, which moved on into more singing, schmoozing, and finally sleeping in piles on the floor. Shabbat morning davening began around 10:00 with a meditative birkot hashachar led by Lev Nelson '99 and wasn't finished until close to 2:00. Lunch, provided by the Wesleyan contingent under the fearless leadership of Joe Berman '99, was excellent, prompting a discussion of why kosher caterers can't make vegetarian food the way fruity Jews can. The afternoon--what was left of it--was spent walking on the beach, telling stories, studying Torah, and bonding in what has become affectionately known as a "cuddle puddle." Havdalah, led by Yona Gorelick '00, spilled over into a wild song and dance session, but as the evening wore on and many of us returned home, it quieted down into an intimate setting for studying Kabbalah, talking about topics ranging from contemporary Judaism to progressive economics, and of course, more singing.

Two things stand out in an appraisal of Jews in the Woods: independence and community-process pluralism. The Shabbaton was organized and run entirely by students. And this doesn't only mean logistics--food, venue, attendance, reimbursement--but extends also to addressing group issues ahead of time. This is the second year that email has been used to provide a forum for discussing how the weekend would be structured--who could lead which sections of davening, what kind of mechitza was needed and how it could be constructed, what standards of kashrut we would adopt, and how we would make everyone feel ownership of a space which is uniquely communal. The group encompassed a wide range of personal observances, and although there was some friction, it was a learning experience for all involved.

Jews in the Woods has grown and changed significantly since its inception. The first JitW was organized in 1997 by Dan Smokler '96 and a small group of friends. Fall '03, the sixth JitW, had participants from Harvard, Brandeis, Brown, RISD, Johnson and Wales, Yale, Wesleyan, Vassar, Columbia, Barnard, and the JTS joint program. Many did not know each other prior to meeting at the Haffenreffer--news of and excitement about Jews in the Woods has spread by word of mouth--but they left having become part of a growing network and community of fruity Jews. Plans are already underway for JitW Spring '04, as are discussions about the future development and sustainability of the JitW concept.

Other Bronfman alums who were at Jews in the Woods include Eli Braun '01, Zack Luck '01, Anya Manning '02, Jaclyn Rubin '02, and Rachel Stone '00.