

Jews in the Woods

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by Lev Nelson

A new grassroots phenomenon, “Fruity Jews in the Woods,” is taking off in the Jewish college-age communities of the Northeast. Part Shabbaton, part community, and part way of life, Fruity Judaism is on the move; with the conclusion of April’s Shabbaton, the network now extends as far west as Ohio and as far south as Virginia. And Fruity Jews’ enthusiasm for the project and for each other will no doubt ensure a continued rapid spread. These future leaders of the American Jewish community have a vision for change, and the skills and background to perhaps make it happen.

What exactly is a fruity Jew? Endless discussion of the question has resulted in a general consensus that it is best not to try and define it too closely. Fruity Jews are some or all of the following: pluralistic, progressive, community-oriented, open to new experiences and people, creative, environmentally conscious, spiritual, and energetic. Of course, being Jews, the precise meaning of any of those terms is up for debate. Most of all, they tend to see drawbacks in institutional Judaism, and they believe they can make it more than it currently is.

The most recent Jews in the Woods Shabbaton, held April 9-11 in Amherst, MA, followed the pattern of the previous two Shabbatonim, which seems to have stabilized as the basic template—although there is always room for further development and imagination. About 70 Jews—from across all denominations, plus unidentified, post-denominational, and a host of other flavors—gathered into a single service on Friday night, with much singing and dancing. Afterwards, dinner degenerated into singing, shmoozing, and eventually sleeping. Services on Shabbat morning began with yoga and meditation and continued through both the full Hebrew liturgy and interpretational additions—running long, since nobody wanted to cut anything out. The afternoon provided time for informal Torah study, hikes in the woods, and naptime; Havdalah segued into an evening of crazy dance, song, and drumming, which mellowed into a campfire, and more singing and talking late into the night.

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 (which had to be kosher for Passover this time), venue, attendance, reimbursement—but extends also to addressing group issues ahead of time. This is the third Shabbaton for which 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. And the listserv remains active now that the Shabbaton is over: with encouragements to attend the March for Women’s Lives and offers of hospitality in D.C., with divrei Torah, with job postings in the progressive Jewish world, and with reflections on the weekend and suggestions and concerns to address next time.

More than the increase in numbers, the listserv is emblematic of the shift that Jews in the Woods has undergone. The first Jews in the Woods Shabbaton was organized in 1997 by Dan Smokler, Margie Klein (both BYFI ’96), and a group of their friends from Yale, Dartmouth, and Harvard. About 30 people attended, but they knew each other already; the focus was less on pluralism than on simply a chill, spiritual Shabbat. The retreats continued annually until Smokler and Klein graduated from college, at which time Brown University students—non-Bronfmanim—took over the event and helped it grow to the semiannual event it is now.

The Spring '04 Shabbaton brought together Jews from over a dozen schools, many of whom did not know each other beforehand. It brought them together to learn from each other, challenge each other, sing with each other, and hug each other. Orthodox Jews who were there expressed their surprise and sheer joy at being able to remain within the bounds of halakha and yet explore Judaism in a host of new ways—through African dance, for instance—and not have people prejudge them. “Secular” Jews marveled at a setting where traditional Judaism—mostly in Hebrew—came alive and didn’t seem intimidating. The fruity philosophy holds that each Jew has something to teach and something to learn about Judaism and about life.

While the weekend itself was a unique and sacred space, it was not something left behind in Amherst. Participants have been able to bring the energy of Fruity Judaism back to school with them and use it to reinvigorate Jewish life on campus or in their post-college communities. The JitW listserv has 125 members currently, and more are always welcome to join. A critical mass is developing, enough to snowball and create a network of committed, idealistic young Jewish leaders with the brains and skills to make their idealism into reality. In that respect, Jews in the Woods is a good fit for BYFI. Bronfman alumni grants have partially supported the past two fruity Shabbatonim, in an effort to keep the price low for participants. A number of recent fellows are involved in the fruity community, including Joe Berman '99, Eli Braun '01, Abby Friemdan '02, Yona Gorelick '00, Zack Luck '01, Anya Manning '02, Lev Nelson '99, Elizabeth Ochs '01, Jaelyn Rubin '02, Erin Scharff '99, and Rachel Stone '00. But the truly beautiful thing is that the overlap between the BYFI alumni network and the Jews in the Woods network strengthens both. If the mission is to think critically about the future of the Jewish people and nudge it in the direction of vibrancy and pluralism, there could be no better alliance than that between Bronfman and Jews in the Woods.