



5 Fruity Jews Get out the Vote

5 Fruity Jews Get out the Vote?, Anya Kamnetz, The Forward, this piece talks about the voting registration drive in the summer of 2004 and the role of 5 members of our community in that holy work.

The article can be found here (free registration required):

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Five 'Fruity Jews' Get Out the Vote By ANYA KAMENETZ July 9, 2004

It is a beautiful summer Friday in Seattle's University District, and Frances Kreimer, 21, is wrapped in a tallit, praying the morning service outside an international students' dorm. Inside, challah is rising in the kitchen, and Kreimer's four roommates are making preparations for the Sabbath. The five East Coast college students have come out West for the summer to create a unique experience combining social action, Jewish learning and communal living — not under the auspices of any Jewish institution or movement, but according to their own interpretation.

"Social justice, real and applied, is at the core of what Judaism means to me," said Kreimer, a junior at Columbia who is majoring in international relations with an interdisciplinary concentration in human rights. "My goal for the summer is to live intentionally, taking advantage of the full opportunity to integrate social justice into Jewish spirituality and practice and vice versa."

All five students are working full time, Sunday to Thursday, registering voters for a nonpartisan, nonprofit, though decidedly left-leaning, grass-roots public interest citizen group called Washington Citizen Action. They are part of a group of about 150 students, mostly from the East Coast, organized by a student group at Yale called 2004ward. The five of them have gone out around the country to work for local groups, funded by a stipend.

They also are part of a nationwide political movement. This election, which most polls predict will be as close as the one in 2000, is widely believed to belong to the party that registers the most new voters. In a renewed emphasis on grass-roots tactics, the parties and community groups alike have brought unprecedented numbers of feet to the ground to register as many new voters as possible. Both partisan groups like America Coming Together — billed as the largest voter registration project in American history and one dedicated to defeating President Bush — and nonpartisan efforts like the New Voters Project in six Western and Midwestern battleground states are in on the action.

The Seattle students spend their often-rainy days at bus stops, at welfare and government services offices, or in the parking lots of big-box stores, targeting the poor, members of minority groups and other historically disenfranchised communities. "It's the best assignment you could imagine," said Michaela Matt, 19, a junior at Brown. "In a way, this work has made me less hopeful because I see how entrenched the forces of apathy are.... But it also makes me more hopeful when another person sees that you care about them and their voice."

"Registering someone who's just turning 18 and sharing with them my enthusiasm and passion for the political process is amazing," said Rena Staub, 18, a sophomore at Barnard College. "I've never done this kind of direct, in-the-streets work."

There are a dozen 2004ward volunteers working for Washington Citizen Action, but the Jewish and communal elements of the summer are unique to this team of five. "The communal and Jewish aspects of the summer were just implicit in the people who came together," said Zach Lazarus, 21, a junior at Wesleyan who organized the team. They share three cluttered rooms in the student dorm, cook together, pray together, go camping on the weekends together, read the Prophets and Abraham Joshua Heschel and Gandhi and the 19th-century anarchist Frantz Fanon, and hold long, meandering conversations about the meaning of their work and about the future of Judaism.

"The theology of tikkun olam healing the world?, of the interconnectedness of everything, creates certain obligations," said Joseph Berman, 22, who just graduated from Wesleyan. "One of the things it means to be religious is that when you see suffering and oppression around you, you have an obligation to help. But in the current Jewish spectrum, social justice and societal change have been envisioned as being in conflict with Jewish values. One of the things that are so amazing about this summer is that the

gap is really bridged. We pray together and we do activism together."

Bridging the gap between various strains of Judaism is exactly what brought the circle of friends together in the first place. They got to know one another through Jews in the Woods, a loose once- or twice-yearly gathering of progressive college-aged Jewish kids on the East Coast, organized by and for students outside any Hillel or synagogue. They are self-described "fruity Jews," part of a nascent movement of young, spiritually and politically engaged Jews equally informed by the songs of Shlomo Carlebach and the chants of Jews Against the Occupation. The Seattle kids come from Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist and Renewal backgrounds, but all relate in some way to the designation "postdenominational."

Berman is experimenting with putting on tefillin every day; Lazarus is wearing a yarmulke for the first time; the entire group is struggling to compromise with new and different levels of observance as well as new and different levels of social activism.

"In my life I put a lot of things together that seem contradictory because of the way Judaism is divided up now," Berman said. "I'm shomer shabbat and involved in anti-occupation work. I'm vegan, an activist, and queer. When I'm in either religious or activist communities, I have to explain myself somewhat."

Over the summer, though, he and his friends have managed to create their own miniature utopia where disparate aspects of Jewish life are woven together. "It's always been my dream to help create a living, learned, activist, observant Judaism, and that's what's happening here this summer," he said.

The group's goal, set by Washington Citizen Action, is to average 1,000 new voter registrations each by the end of its eight weeks. It may seem like just a drop in the bucket when compared with the 30% of eligible American citizens who are not registered to vote. But the group's spiritual outlook helps them maintain perspective; each of the students, in separate conversations, brought up the famous message from Pirke Avot, the Sayings of the Jewish Fathers: "It is not for you to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it."

"I have a conviction," Matt said, "that when I look at the world and see something wrong, that's G-d speaking to me through the world, calling on me to act and enter into a dialogue with G-d. If you try to conceive of the goal of activism as changing this one law, passing this one act, it's very easy to get burned out. Because clearly the work is not going to get done in your lifetime. But maybe those moments of feeling one with that other person is the point of it all."

Anya Kamenetz is a freelance writer living in New York.

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