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In the Moment 5765

Into the Woods

Douglas Gorney

You wear dreadlocks, listen to Phish, keep kosher and bind tefillin. Or you're an Orthodox Jew with braided forelocks who loves to daven outdoors. Where do you fit in?

Jews in the Woods, a multi-campus student movement in the Northeast, has been holding twice-yearly Shabbat gatherings to bring together Jewish students from across the denominational spectrum. Spiritually curious, socially responsible, wired and networked, this virtual community of more than 350 young people scattered from Boston to Chicago uses a Yahoo! Group to stay in touch and plan weekend getaways. When they meet at a retreat center in the mountainous woods of Western Massachusetts, they study fifth century midrash, discuss community responsibility, meditate, daven and dance.

"Reuniting the scattered sparks of American Jewish life" is what Jews in the Woods are about, says Zachary Teutsch, a student at Brown University and one of the group's leading organizers. "A lot of the people who come to Jews in the Woods are people who don't like boxes," he says. "The Jewish community is all about boxes. In many places it is so fractured because we concentrate on the differences rather than the dreams we all share—the togetherness we yearn for and the community we all seek."

Venturing into the forest on a given shabbaton weekend, Jews in the Woods participants find "schmoozing, contact improv, jamming and frolicking," playing out against a backdrop of traditional Shabbat prayer and Torah study. The schedule unfolds organically, says Teutsch, leaving plenty of room for spontaneity.

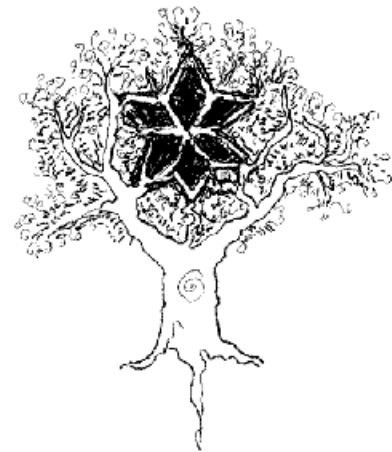
"On our spring shabbaton," he recalls, "a group decided to go for a hike after lunch. Some of us stopped halfway up a hill by an old oak tree, sat down on a pile of rocks and began singing a niggun. You could hear it echoing all the way up the hill. As we sang, groups of twos and threes streamed in from all directions and joined in."

Joe Gindi, a Wesleyan graduate now with the Jewish Campus Service Corps at Yale University, likens Jews in the Woods to the Havurah movement. A product of the 1960s, Havurah advocates a grass-roots, collectively-owned experience independent of rabbis and synagogues. But unlike Havurah, Jews in the Woods is firmly rooted in the Internet era—its far flung members have grown up using the World Wide Web and depend on email to maintain a tight-knit virtual community.

"While the weekend retreats are important," says Gindi, "for me, Jews in the Woods is primarily a network of Jews who are interested in exploring their spirituality, and exploring with those of like mind. We go to the retreats and continue to stay in touch. It's the 21st century and we're all networked—we don't have to be in the same place."

In addition to organizing get-aways, Jews in the Woods organizes political and environmental projects around the country, such as a recent "Ruach the Vote" voter registration drive in Cleveland.

Inevitably, most of the group's members will graduate and emerge from the foliage, settling



into careers and family life. But Gindi says Jews in the Woods is only the first phase of an ongoing movement to “bring back all the energy, the excitement, the kavanah (spiritual intention)” to the Jewish community at large. Former participants have gone on to start community-oriented minyanim of young adults in New York, Washington, DC and San Francisco. In the process, says Gindi, Jews who once wondered if Judaism had a place for them have discovered that it does. “Judaism doesn’t have to be the shul you went to as a kid,” he says. “It doesn’t have to be a set of rules and prohibitions.”

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