

Elat Chayyim

The Jewish Retreat Center

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Sukkot with Jews In The Woods

For any of the Neshamah Fellowship who thought they were America's leading young Jewish spiritual-eco-Torah community, the arrival of the Jews in the Woods probably came as a rude surprise.

Descending en masse erev Shabbat Succot, the artists formerly known as Fruity Jews piled headlong into Elat Chayyim, filling the living room with sleeping bags, backpacks, djembe drums and a vibrant energy of expectation.

Living the Torah

Three hours later a succah had appeared from nowhere ('Pray in it, sit in it, eat in it – just try not to touch the walls,' advised the woody Jew in charge of construction) and groups of young men and women were ready, towels over shoulders, to go and immerse themselves before the arrival of the festive Sabbath.

What a weekend! For the twelve of us who live here full-time, the influx of over a hundred new friendly, committed, spiritual, experimental young Jews was like a cool breeze on a hot day. Meeting for little more than 24 hours, their energy to sing, dance, learn and schmooze was inspiring to all.

Throughout Shabbat participants facilitated sessions for each other on topics as diverse as 'radical orthodoxy,' eco-midrash, contact improvisational dance, and Arabic for beginners.

A Trans-Denominational Community

Now in its eighth year, Jews in the Woods provides a unique opportunity for Jewish college students to meet, mingle and create the currents in Judaism they want to live with. Comprising a diversity of Jewish backgrounds, beliefs and practices, this is a truly trans-denominational community, where mediation and compromise are central to the project of a meaningful living Judaism.

With large contingents coming from Ivy League schools, Brandeis, and top liberal arts colleges, it is clear that this is a movement particularly appealing to the next generation of young intellectual Jews. And the movement is growing - around 40% of the people at the Succot meeting were Jews newly into the woods!

New Meaning



For me, the highlight of the weekend was indubitably the Kabbalat Shabbat service. Walking into the barn, warm with the light of Shabbat candles and packed tight with people, I was struck by the unexpected unfamiliarity of the two (optional) mechitzah-partitions and the single individual leading from the front of the room.

For the first time since my arrival at Elat Chayyim, group davenning basically conformed to the traditional liturgy. But this was not traditional davenning like my (orthodox) shul at home. This was not received, routine or retrograde. This was joyful!

Heavenly Choir

As I stood in my corner of the room I could hear a whole arc of voices swaying in prayer, a beautiful choir more heavenly, more spontaneous than anything I had ever heard. As the energy rose and grew, people began to clap, then to stamp, then to dance round and round in ecstatic Chassidic circles.

Suddenly a whole new understanding opened up to me. This is why Jews pray together! For it is when we come together like this that God really draws close to dwell in our midst.

God amongst us

When, at the conclusion of that deep, joyful hour of song and dance and prayer, we said the Kaddish, I really felt we had the power, as a community, to bring blessing on God's name. And when we sang Shema Yisrael — 'Hear, O Israel: God is our Lord, God is One,' I understood that this is the song which Jews are meant to sing to each other, telling each other: 'We believe in the same thing, and that thing is here — just listen!'

This community was far more than the sum of its parts. This coming together, inspired by tolerance, inclusivity and the love of Torah — this held the Divine presence.

These may be Jews in the woods now, but I hope that before long their energy will come to fill the cities, the synagogues, and the schools. For this is the communal Judaism I have always hoped for.

—Sarah Gershuny, member of the [Neshamah Residential Community](#)



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