

Grassroots Spirituality: As Jews in the Woods Grows, It Weighs Whether to Open Its Doors

Jay Michaelson | Fri. Aug 04, 2006

Jews in the Woods is not one of the lost tribes camping out in Appalachia.

It doesn't even take place in the woods. It is, however, a remarkable grass-roots, ever-changing community of college students and immediate post-college graduates who come together twice a year for a "full and uncompromising embrace of Shabbat," in the words of Zach Teutsch, one of the group's recent coordinators.

What distinguishes the group from hundreds of other such gatherings is, on the one hand, that students organize everything - from ritual to education to cooking to transportation - and, on the other, that the alumni of the organization read like a veritable "who's who" of young Jewish leaders, across denominational and ideological lines. And, of course, that the group does all of this with little financial backing, no formal structure, and no Jewish organization calling the shots.

Rabbi Daniel Smokler, now director of outreach for national Hillel, co-founded *Jews in the Woods* in 1997, when he was a freshman at Yale University. At the beginning, Smokler said in an interview with the *Forward*, *Jews in the Woods* was simply a network of friends "who were all seekers, looking for an experience of community that they knew was out there but hadn't experienced yet." (The name apparently came from Smokler's sense of being "out in the wilderness Jewishly.") They had no ideology, and no money, yet the gatherings quickly swelled in size, and gained a reputation for its uniquely spirited (and long) prayer services. "We sing more than just about anywhere else," says Teutsch, who estimates that there are more than 300 active participants on the group's mailing list, with between 50 and 75 attending each gathering.

"This is coming out of our generation, for our generation," said Julia Appel, an incoming student in the rabbinical program at Boston's Hebrew College. Appel first attended *Jews in the Woods* in 2003 and chaired gatherings in 2004 and 2005. "We're sick of people feeding us packaged things that they think are supposed to be cool and young, when what we really want is an authentic Jewish experience."

But this striving for authenticity also led the group to restrict entry to people who already knew at least one current attendee - a decision that remains one of its most controversial. Indeed, the organization can seem almost shadowy. Practically every young Jewish leader knows someone who's been involved, but there is no Web site, no formal organizational structure and no agreed-on set of guiding principles. As the group's prominence grows - with alumni graduating into central roles in professional Jewish life - some participants have begun to press for more openness and accountability.

"We never claimed to be democratic," Smokler said. "We asked, 'Who needs to be there?'" Eventually, according to Appel, the restriction on joining the group became necessary to preserve the safety of the events. "*Jews in the Woods* has a high potential for being exploited, because people are so open, and it's a very open community," Appel said. "Part of why we've been successful is that everyone in the community has someone else to vouch for them."

"To have a safe community, you don't just let everyone in; you have to have some screening process," echoed Shulamit Izen, a student at Brown University who is slated to chair one of the fall 2006 gatherings (the organization has grown so large that there are now often "northerly" and "southerly" gatherings).

Nevertheless, Izen, whose activist work at the Gan High School in Boston is the subject of the film "*Hineini: Coming Out in a Jewish High School*," added that in response to criticisms that the organization is elitist, there are discussions on the *Jews in the Woods* e-mail list about setting up an informational Web site with a contact e-mail address. This would allow someone from within the group to dialogue with an interested party to see if he or she is a "good fit."

Such informality is part of the point, Appel said. "Trying to come up with an official mission statement takes away somewhat from what we're doing, which is looking at each retreat as a fresh start and what kind of experience people want it to be." While this approach naturally makes decision-making more time consuming - "we repeat the mantra 'Logistically expect the worst, mystically expect the best,'" Teutsch said - it's clear from talking with *Jews in the Woods* participants that the process is the point: Building community is largely what the organization is about.

Another of the signal features of *Jews in the Woods* is its commitment to pluralism - but a pluralism marked by an effort to achieve consensus. The most obvious example: the "tri-chitza," a seating plan that allows men's, women's and mixed-gender seating at the same worship services.

"We have former yeshiva bokhers learning yoga. We have people returning from Buddhism because they found Judaism can be deeply spiritual and meaningful," Teutsch said. "Instead of asking whether we can daven together, we ask how can we daven together. I think we are the only group which has met constantly and had people from Reconstructionist, Modern Orthodox, Conservative, Renewal, Reform and atheist backgrounds all davening in a single service. It hasn't always been easy, but it has always been magical."

Today, what began as a small group of friends with one charismatic leader has grown into a collectively run organization with a huge e-mail list, three retreats per year and a cohort that would make the Jewish institutional world green with envy. As a result, many Jews in the Woods are now debating whether to incorporate and fundraise. This, Izen said, is "what most organizations have to have as they grow: a certain structure that comes into place. I don't think Jews in the Woods would lose anything."

Appel, however, says that she wants the organization to stay "grass roots."

"Jewish community-building that makes for vibrant and empowered Jews comes from the community," she argued. "If it were to be appropriated by an organization, we would lose what Jews in the Woods is about, which is every single person pitching in to make a community happen."

Of course, Jews in the Woods never has been entirely autonomous. It has long sought and accepted grants, from local Hillel chapters or the Samuel Bronfman Foundation (several participants are Bronfman Youth Fellowship alumni), in order to subsidize travel costs and pay for food, and it has relied on members' connections to find low-cost venues for gatherings. But, Appel maintained, "we don't need that much money. And the special thing about Jews in the Woods is the way the weekend is created."

And perhaps that alumni list, which, as both Teutsch and Smokler observed, includes Reform and Orthodox rabbis, Conservative movement leaders, labor union leaders, day school teachers, professors of Jewish studies and more than a few "professional Jews."

For them, Teutsch said, it has been an inspiration, "to return to Judaism, to start new minyanim [prayer groups], to work in the Jewish community, to fight for justice and to refuse to accept old tropes about impossibility."

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