

British Jews are using Facebook to create new “pop-up” communities

*Social media has empowered young British Jews who are dissatisfied with existing communal structures to create their own shared spaces. **Nathan Abrams** finds that digital culture serves as an important sphere for religious self-definition as well as offering a new and different encounter with Judaism.*



Image: Flickr, Christopher

In 2008 a group of young Jews came together to form a new congregation to hold truly independent **High Holyday services** in London. While many of them already knew each other from face-to-face interaction, it was really Facebook that had enabled them to reach out to a wider constituency. Without Facebook, the organizers admitted, their coming together wouldn't have been so effective.

Social media has enabled young Jews to transform the religious landscape in Britain by forming “pop-up” congregations. These small, emerging, mobile, congregations are divorced from the existing religious infrastructure, which they see as dull and staid. Communal approval is neither requested nor sought.

Over the last decade, the British Jewish community has seen the growth of a number of these self-organizing pop-up communities and congregations. These are grassroots, bottom up, young people-generated activities, reflecting their rejection of institutional structures, as well as expressing the values of diversity and inclusiveness already witnessed in the United States in an offline setting.

They did so without the interference of the professionally staffed organizations around the British-Jewish community – although over the years, such organizations have carried out the important task of providing support to these growing pop-up communities. They feel that inclusiveness, experimentation, exploration, and a spirit of joy are missing from the typical communal fare in the United Kingdom and that such fare is the antithesis of heartfelt, soul centered and intellectually inspiring Judaism.



The most prominent of these groups are Wandering Jews, **Carlebach Minyan**, **Jewdas**, **MoHoLo**, and the first completely independent post-denominational pop-up community in London, **Grassroots Jews**, which I studied between 2008 and 2010.

In these congregations new forms of Jewish practice have emerged, unshackled from the constraints of denominational control. Because they are not guided by a sole religious authority figure or lay denominational infrastructure, it has allowed young Jews some freedom to experiment with Judaism. This has included such innovations as a *trichitzah*. Playing on the Hebrew word *mechitzah* for the partition that segregates men and women in orthodox congregations, this adaptation refers to a tripartite seating area for men, women, and mixed seating, allowing individuals to choose where to sit. There's also a section for people who don't even want to participate in the service at all. Women also play an important part in delivering the service, leading prayer and reading from the Torah.

These pop-up communities and congregations pride themselves on creating gatherings that they feel are pluralist, inclusive, heartfelt, soul centered, intellectually inspiring, vibrant, and full of vitality to fill the gap of what they often find so lacking in more traditional communal events. They are self-organizing collectives characterized by their refusal to be labeled by the existing denominational tags. They typically draw in participants from the existing mainstream branches of Reform, Liberal, and Orthodoxy (Haredim are usually absent unless they are ex- or lapsed Haredi), as well as the religiously unaffiliated.

The philosophy and principles of these collectives are to create very different Jewish spaces to the synagogues and other communal organizations, as well as to be egalitarian, democratic, peer-led, informal, and inclusive. They are avowedly open, welcoming to non-Jews, organized and led by volunteers, have no paid clergy or denominational affiliation, meet at least once a month and not linked formally or directly with any of the mainstream communal organizations in the United Kingdom. Neither age nor bank balance is a barrier to the level of involvement or to the roles that can be take on. In all of these ways, they perceive themselves to be different from the existing communal infrastructure.

These groupings subscribe to a very broad definition of Jewishness in an arena where such definitions are complex and contested. Rather than take sides in denominational debates, these groups allow Jews to self-identify. They do not always rely on normative definitions of who is a Jew or Judaism in constructing their offline pop-up congregations.

Core participants have a more serious commitment to community and to prayer than the average synagogue member\goer, who can rely on institutional staff to look after logistics and lead prayers. Significantly, the organizers and participants are not marginalized Jews. Most of them are in the late twenties to early forties age band, are well known for their communal activism, individuals who cut their teeth in mainstream organizations as the Union of Jewish Students, Bnei Akiva, Noam, RSY-Netzer, and Limmud, as well as the new initiatives mentioned above. Some of them are even the children of well-known rabbis.

These Jews use their creativity and commitment to organize independently, to build meaningful Jewish experiences and to create ritual on their own terms outside of community institutions but within their own organic community of friends and family. They resist labeling by existing religious institutions and reject existing branches of Judaism to create something more fluid. These Jews tend to be, but are not exclusively, under thirty who often feel excluded from religious life.

Negotiation with new media has enabled young British Jews' to redefine Judaism in new and flourishing ways that very well may not have occurred in a more formal online/offline setting in which religion is dictated from above, i.e. at the organizational level, rather than from below. These offline communities, in turn, have helped to address feelings of alienation or disenfranchisement amongst post-denominational Jews dissatisfied with the existing communal and congregational infrastructure but who are not wishing to abandon some form of shared public space **a^{to}gether**.



Such communities provide greater opportunities for religious self-definition, as well as a qualitatively different encounter with Judaism.

About the author



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