



The New Face OF JEWISH OUTREACH

In a typical month in the Houston area, members of the Jewish community study aspects of Jewish law and philosophy with *kollel* rabbis, Jewish residents of a nearby suburb attend *Shabbaton* programs and lectures led by the rabbis of Houston's largest Orthodox synagogue and Jewish students at the city's public high schools spend their free time discussing basic Jewish concepts with Orthodox youth leaders.

Few of the participants in these activities are Orthodox.

Houston, which has grown into the nation's fourth-largest city but is better known for Stetsons than for Bor-

salinos, is the new face of Jewish outreach in the United States. Its *kiruv*, outreach, programs represent the current trend of outreach efforts that bring traditional Judaism to the largely non-Orthodox American Jewish population.

There are 5.2 million Jews in America today, but only 3.3 to 3.4 million adhere to any type of Judaism. Roughly one quarter of those who identify as Jewish consider themselves Orthodox.

(2009 American Religious Identification Study by Barry Kosmin and Ariela Keysar)

Out-of-Town Outreach

Three decades after the early *kiruv* movement's *yeshivot* and classes on Torah began fostering the thousands of *ba'alei teshuvah* who revitalized Orthodox Judaism, today's successful outreach programs look different. For one thing, while *kiruv* organizations in New York City still offer a variety of innovative outreach activities, a growing number of start-up outreach programs are coming from other Jewish communities across the United States and Canada.

"*Kiruv* is much more sophisticated these days," says Rabbi Steven Burg, international director of NCSY, the international teen organization sponsored by the Orthodox Union (OU) dedicated to connecting Jewish teens to Torah.

Steve Lipman is a staff writer for the Jewish Week in New York.

In the early years of the *teshuvah* movement, most of the successful programs originated in New York. But thanks to the ease of communications fostered by the Internet and a flowering of Orthodoxy in smaller communities across the United States and Canada, many *kiruv* programs today originate in a larger number of cities like Los Angeles and Toronto, according to outreach authorities.

Kohn, director of the Jewish Renaissance Center, a Manhattan-based outreach center for women, and are using that free time to learn about Judaism.)

Rabbis without Borders

Once *kiruv* activities were based in sites like synagogues and Jewish schools, and participants traveled to the programs. Today, the programs go to where there are potential partici-

Rabbi Yitzchak Rosenbaum, associate director of the National Jewish Outreach Program (NJOP), a pioneering *kiruv* group, agrees. The Jewish community is more spread out nowadays, with more and more Jews settling in areas with no identifiable Jewish neighborhood, he says. NJOP is based in New York City but coordinates non-denominational activities, like crash courses in Hebrew and

“You are no longer going to find unaffiliated Jews in the JCCs or the synagogues. . . . You’re going to find them in other venues. We have to engage them in their own territory, in their comfort zone.”

The number of American Jews who identify as religious has dropped by more than 20 percent over the past two decades, while the cultural Jewish population (Jews who identify by ethnicity alone) has nearly doubled.

(2009 American Religious Identification Study by Barry Kosmin and Ariela Keysar)



An NCSY advisor plays the guitar as youngsters dance at the NCSY National Convention, circa 1974.

Outside of New York, there tends to be a more open approach to Judaism, encouraging programs that transcend Jewish labels, says Rabbi Gavriel Jacknin, educational director of TORCH, the Torah Outreach Research Center of Houston. “Away from New York, the slower pace of life allows people to listen in the first place,” he says. “In New York, everyone is busy?”

(Although nowadays, with the economic downturn, even unaffiliated New Yorkers are finding the time to learn. More people have more time on their hands, says Rebbetzin Leah

pants—to coffee houses and college campuses and public high schools.

“You are no longer going to find unaffiliated Jews in the JCCs or the synagogues,” says Rabbi Burg. “You’re going to find them in other venues. We have to engage them in their own territory, in their comfort zone.”

“It’s a new dynamic,” says Rabbi Kenneth Brander, dean of Yeshiva University’s (YU) Center for the Jewish Future. In other words, the onus is on the *kiruv* community to find and reach out to future members of the Torah-observant community.

Shabbat Across America, which brings tens of thousands of Jews together for an annual Friday night event occurring simultaneously at hundreds of locations in cities across North America.

“You have to work harder” than in the past to find unaffiliated Jews, Rabbi Rosenbaum says. “[Jews] are more scattered. They’re not looking for [Jewish enrichment].”

The new trend in *kiruv* has both rabbis and lay leaders seeking out Jews in high schools and college campuses, cafes, restaurants and office buildings. Think rabbis without borders.

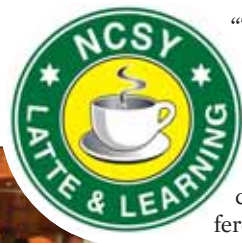
Many of these programs serve as a magnet for Jews because they don’t take place in an obviously Jewish site. Thus, programs loosely wear an “Orthodox” or “outreach” label to avoid scaring away Jews who have little connection with traditional Judaism.

“The average kid who is not Orthodox is terrified by an Orthodox shul,” says Rabbi Burg. “It’s strange. It’s not what he’s used to.” That, he says, is why NCSY has located some of its most successful outreach programs in places like public schools and cafes. “Kids—even youngsters in families that belong to Orthodox congregations—are not in the shul anymore.”

“Cultural Jews are harder to reach; they only vaguely identify with the Jewish community. It’s more difficult to find them.”

(Rabbi Yitzchak Rosenbaum of the National Jewish Outreach Program)

Take Latte and Learning, an NCSY program founded in 1996 in Detroit, which attracts middle and high school students to coffeehouses with an



“Torah hasn’t changed; what’s different is the packaging,” he says. “The *kiruv* movement is all about marketing Orthodoxy.”

Not everyone in the Orthodox community understands this out-of-the-synagogue approach, Rabbi Burg says. One disapproving rabbi commented that “NCSY is not the National Conference of Starbucks Youth.” Interestingly enough,

the NCSY chapter located in that rabbi’s community created a Latte and Learning program that now draws sixty to seventy teens each meeting.

But Rabbi Barry Gelman of Houston’s United Orthodox Synagogues (UOS) understands that a shul can be alienating. So three years ago he started UOS’ outreach to Sugar Land, a bedroom community thirty minutes from Houston with a growing Jewish community but no Orthodox residents. The UOS initiative may be the first such Orthodox synagogue program in the United States that specifically aims to influence a community without Orthodox Jews, Rabbi Gelman says. He continues to lead a monthly Sugar Land study group and last year hired Yeshiva University *musmach* Rabbi Moshe Davis, who coordinates the outreach and leads regular classes in people’s homes as well as a

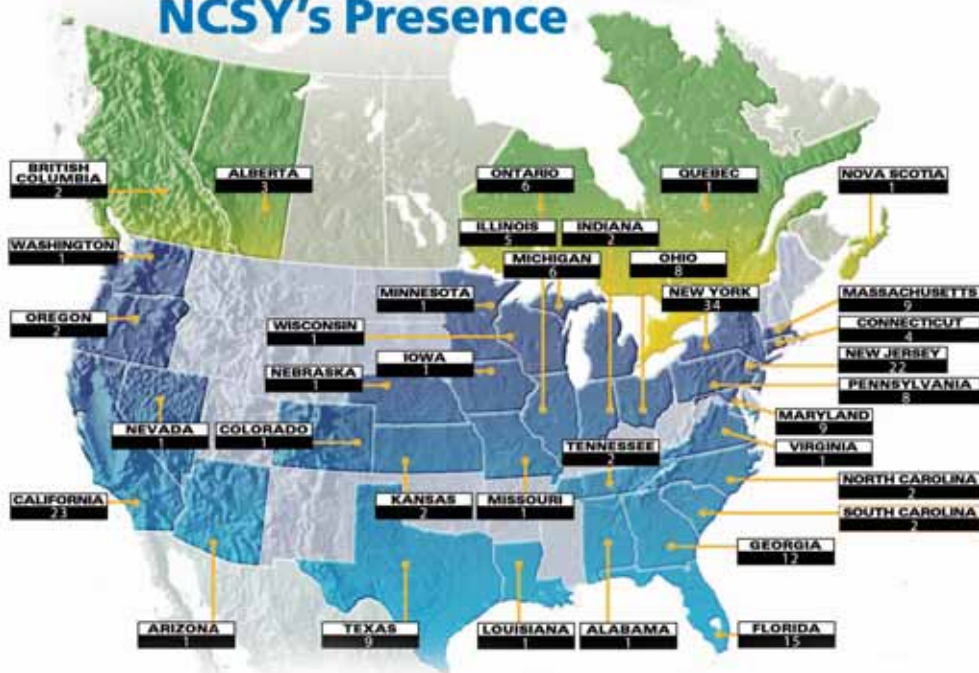
Whereas two-thirds of adult Canadian Jews and nearly 75 percent of French and Australian Jews have been to Israel, only 35 percent of American Jews have visited there even once.
 (“The Truth About American Jews and Israel,” by Jack Wertheimer, Commentary, June 2009)



Rabbi Effie Goldberg (right corner), executive director of West Coast NCSY, teaches Torah to high school students in Beverly Hills, California, at Latte and Learning, a highly successful NCSY program that takes place in coffeehouses.

offer of free coffee and a Torah discussion. The program has spread across the country, from Seattle to Miami. Philosophically, NCSY is making essentially the same pitch it did years ago, when kids were still in the synagogues, Rabbi Burg says.

NCSY’s Presence



More than 35,000 teens in more than 200 cities throughout North America are inspired by NCSY every year. Illustration: Roy Wiemann

monthly *Shabbaton* in the social hall of an assisted living facility.

Interest in Sugar Land is still growing, Rabbi Gelman says. “People are more comfortable in their own homes or in the homes of someone they

“For every *ba'al teshuvah* we make, we probably lose between four or five other Jews.”

(Rabbi Rosenbaum of the NJOP)

know.” Some participants in the Sugar Land program have joined UOS, some have become *shomer Shabbat*, some have moved within walking distance of an Orthodox synagogue, he says, but that isn’t the point.

“The most important goal is to inspire people by exposing them to Torah,” Rabbi Gelman says. “I’m interested in building a community that has lots of different types of Jews. We have a responsibility to teach Torah to whoever wants to have it.”

Niche Kiruv

In recent years, outreach was, or seemed to be, largely in *Chareidi* hands.

But today’s *kiruv* programs range across the Orthodox spectrum, from Modern Orthodox to *Chareidi* auspices. The road of twenty-first-century outreach was paved, in part, *kiruv* experts say, by Chabad, whose *shaliach* couples have for decades served as the lone outposts of Torah Judaism in isolated communities, and by Birthright Israel, whose young participants, after visiting Israel for the first time on the program, tend to return with a sudden openness to strengthening their Jewish identity.

Moreover, with a growing number of trained leaders involved in *kiruv* activities—some of them raised and educated as Torah-observant Jews, some of them young and culturally savvy—many outreach programs are now geared to specific, easy-to-identify niche communities. One-program-serves-all is yesterday. Today, it’s earmarked activities for teens and college students and women and Jews from Soviet or Iranian families.

“Because there are more and more people involved, there is more room for people to specialize,” says Rabbi Rosenbaum.

This is especially true in the émigré community of Jews whose families came from the former Soviet Union. In the early years of the *kiruv* movement,

NJOP programs have been offered at almost 3,700 locations across North America and in 37 countries worldwide. Through these programs and its Jewish consciousness-raising advertising campaigns, NJOP reaches 60-70,000 Jews across North America each year and, to date, has engaged more than 1 million Jews in Jewish life.

many of the programs geared for newcomers who arrived with little or no Jewish background were led by American-born rabbis.

חִקְרִיָּה Hakirah

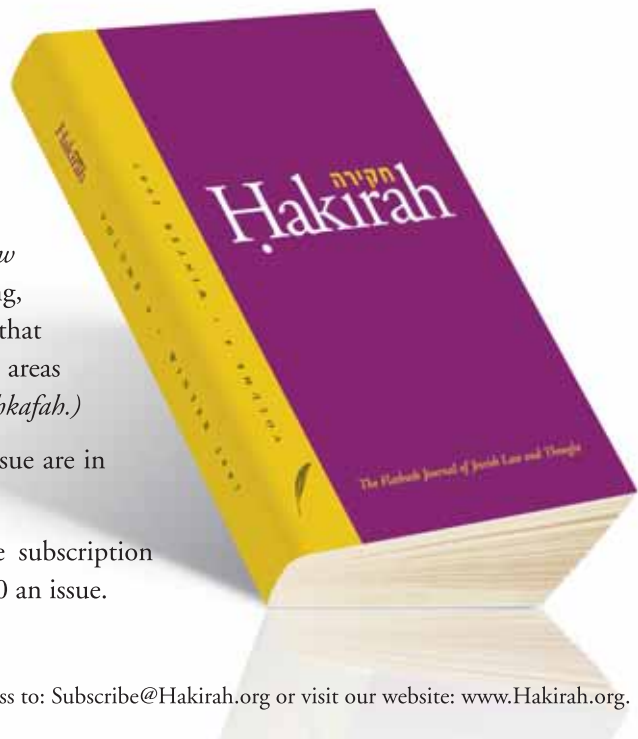
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Among the newer, successful outreach programs in North America that share a “take Judaism-to-the-Jews” approach:

Friday Night Lights: An NCSY program established in small communities throughout New York’s Long Island, Friday Night Lights (FNL) partners with communities to send young charismatic youth leaders to lead *Shabbaton* programs each month. The FNL team, consisting of “all-star” advisors, brings Shabbat food, enthusiasm and inspiration to local teenagers while providing support to the local community’s synagogues and patrons.

Aish Campus: This offshoot of Aish HaTorah underwrites Jewish programming at universities, usually through rabbinical couples who serve as teachers and Shabbat hosts.

JAAM: Rabbi Avraham Jacobovitz’ Jewish Awareness America began on two Michigan campuses and now operates in more than thirty universities in the United States and Canada. JAAM established Maimonides Jewish Leaders Fellowship, its flagship program, which is one of the fastest-growing Jewish leadership training projects in North America. Additionally, its Yeshivaite program project, which combines advanced Jewish learning and training sessions with field trips to Israel and various cities in the United States, is highly successful.

Torah High: Founded in Toronto, this educational project associated with NCSY offers high school credit to students who attend Jewish studies classes in several Canadian and American cities. (See article on page 38.)

JAM: Originally a campus club at the University of California at Los Angeles, the Jewish Awareness Movement, under the auspices of the Ashreinu educational organization, hires young couples to serve as advisors to student clubs on several Southern California campuses, offering a constant Jewish presence at the schools.

JSU: An allied agency working in partnership with NCSY, the Jewish Student Union organizes student-initiated Jewish clubs primarily in public high schools. Founded in 2002 by Rabbi Steven Burg, international director of NCSY, and staffed in the main by NCSY professionals, the organization combats assimilation at its root by making Judaism “cool and relevant” to the largest population of Jewish teens—the unaffiliated. Meetings take place before or after school hours or during lunch break, and clubs operate in 250 schools throughout the United States and Canada.

American Jewish Spirit: A quarterly magazine, *American Jewish Spirit* addresses the lifestyle and interests of a cross-section of the nation’s Jews. Publishers of *American Jewish Spirit* hope to reach the nation’s huge segment of Jews who are reconnecting with their spirituality. The magazine also offers regional editions in association with outstanding Torah outreach centers, most prominently the several dozen community *kollels* that have been changing the Jewish landscape outside of the New York area.

Rabbi Shmuel Skaist: Popularly known as Rav Shmuel, this educator-troubadour brings his guitar and original compositions to New York coffeehouses, where he entertains with a combination of humor, banter and spiritual lyrics.

Now, says Rabbi Eli Blokh, the Moscow-born founder of the Jewish Russian Community Center in Queens, New York, which concentrates its religious and educational efforts on people from the former Soviet Union, there are “many [Soviet-born] Russian-speaking people working in the field.”

Another example: Rabbi Mordechai Tokarsky, a native of St. Petersburg who heads RAJE (Russian American Jewish Experience) in New York, a specialized division of Gateways, an international *kiruv* organization. Rabbi Tokarsky’s colleagues, who are fellow émigrés or members of émigré families, have

Established ten years ago, Birthright Israel has taken more than 200,000 young Jewish adults on a free ten-day educational trip to Israel.

a better understanding of the immigrant mentality and are better equipped to tailor their programs to the participants’ needs.

“In order to be effective in *kiruv*, you have to share common ground culturally with the group you are reaching out to,” says Rabbi Burg. “You have to have grown up with the same Sunday morning cartoons.”

When it comes to outreach, specializing, experts say, makes sense. NCSY often gets referrals from *kiruv* organizations that have made parents *frum* but are unable to reach the teenagers in the family. “Teenagers’ brains are in a different place. They are not adults and they are not kids,” says Rabbi Burg. “Adult *kiruv* tends to be intellectual; teen *kiruv* is social. It’s all about hanging out.”

Thirsting to Learn

“Sage academic types were convinced that the *teshuvah* revolution [of the 1970s] was running out of steam. It was part of a general American return to religion, or left-over idealism from the ‘60s, or a reaction to the devaluing of the individual, which eventually people would come to grips with,” Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein, author and educator, wrote two years ago on his Cross-Currents blog. “They were all wrong. All those cultural trends have come and gone, and there is no end in sight. More and more people emerge each day who wish to learn.”

At the same time, however, there are not as many willing to leave everything behind to go study Torah. Several decades ago, Rebbetzin Kohn says, people were anti-establishment and were quick to leave everything behind to join a yeshiva. Today, by contrast, they want to learn in addition to everything else they’re doing. It’s not that learning is less important, she says, but that in some ways “it’s a different reality. . . . [People] are more realistic and more grounded.”

Chabad's more than 3,000 "shluchim," emissaries who serve the Jewish public, are found in more than 70 countries around the world. Chabad also reaches more than 50,000 students on 238 campuses in North and South America, Europe, Australia, the former Soviet Union and Israel.

Kollel Kiruv

TORCH in Houston represents another *kiruv* trend: ubiquitous *kollelim* that bring young scholars and their families to cities unfamiliar with advanced Jewish learning. The rabbis, and often their wives, dedicate significant time to teaching classes and participating in *chavruta* learning.

According to the Association for Jewish Outreach Professionals (AJOP), the major *kiruv* umbrella organization, nearly three dozen community-supported *kollel* programs—some are affiliated with the Mizrahi-oriented Torah Mitzion movement, others take a more *Chareidi*, Lakewood-inspired approach—are in operation in the United States, some in such unlikely Jewish settings as Savannah, Georgia; Des Moines, Iowa; and Norfolk, Virginia.

Local synagogues help establish the *kollelim*, NJOP's Rabbi Rosenbaum says, as an investment in the future of their communities and the viability of their congregations. In addition, YU rabbis, sponsored by YU's Center for the Jewish Future, take part in temporary *kollel* programs across the country during their vacation time.

The rabbis in ten-year-old TORCH are "Yeshivish—but not all the guys wear black hats," Rabbi Jacknin says. They teach approximately one thousand people a month, including participants in well-attended women's conferences and medical ethics conferences, he says. Many of the *kollel* classes are held in Reform and Conservative synagogues. "The shuls are happy to have us teach classes," he says.

Upstate, in Dallas, the community *kollel* is developing a hands-on, user-friendly brand of Torah Judaism. Based on the campus of the Akiba Academy and Yavneh Academy, the

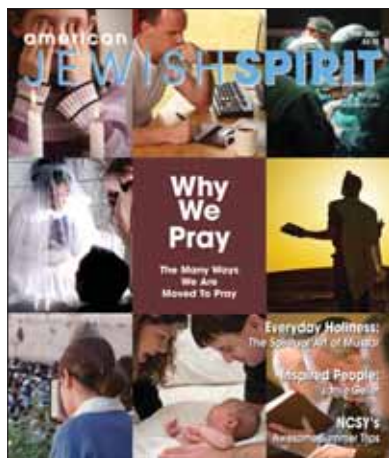
kollel aims its activities at the parents of the schools' students.

It offers an ongoing Shabbat Family Minyan, a "halachic prayer service" that features explanations of the *tefillah* and a Shabbat box, a bi-weekly container that offers educational materials and family activities on a Shabbat theme, says Rabbi Joe Hirsch, program coordinator.

Facebook Outreach

The new blood in outreach has helped to generate new ideas.

It's a revolution in tactics, or rather an evolution that has adapted over the years to new realities in the Jewish community, Rabbi Rosenbaum says. He



American Jewish Spirit magazine hopes to reach Jews who are reconnecting with their spirituality.

calls today's successful programs a Generation Y throwback to the popular mixed dances that Orthodox organizations sponsored as early as the 1920s to attract unaffiliated and marginally affiliated Jews. Then, they met at dances; today, on Facebook. Indeed, many of the Jewish community's new *kiruv* programs use high-tech Internet initiatives and online social networking to spread their spiritual message. These programs include projectsinai.org, which concentrates on "personal growth"; theshmuz.com, which offers interactive forty-five-minute Torah lectures; jewishpathways.com, an Aish HaTorah-developed Web site and globalyeshiva.com, a source of videos, blogs and more. One can also study Torah via video podcast and mp3 audio.

"*Kiruv* has changed," Rabbi Adlerstein wrote in Cross-Currents. "*Kiruv* has become familiar and comfortable with technology and sophisticated graphic presentation."

People in all the new outreach activities "are thinking out of the box," developing new techniques and new venues for reaching Jews unfamiliar with traditional Judaism, Rabbi Rosenbaum says. NJOP, he says, has turned to such innovations as Twitter, YouTube videos and e-mail updates to reach its hip target audience. "Society is changing. People"—especially young people—"don't read newspapers. They read e-mails."

"Many outreach professionals are using Facebook, Twitter, et cetera, for recruiting and communication," says

Aish HaTorah International consists of more than 100 branches and projects and has 750 full-time employees.

Rabbi Alexander Seinfeld, executive director of Jewish Spiritual Literacy, a Baltimore-based educational organization that seeks to revitalize Jewish spiritual education. "But I'm not sure this counts as a trend, because regardless of the trend, *kiruv* still boils down to relationships. These new tools are just that—tools."

Rabbi Burg agrees. The NCSY web site features videos about its upcoming and past activities, and the youth organization is active in the world of Twitter.

"Everything we do is on Facebook, since that's where the kids operate," he says. "Of course, the most important thing is the one-on-one relationship; you can't replace the human dimension." ■

