

## Joining the Club *By Harvey Blitz*



*Action* where he writes, "American Jewry is shrinking, and at a rapid and seemingly irreversible rate."

What is clear from these surveys is that the Jewish community is going in two directions: Involved Jews are becoming much more involved, but many less involved Jews are becoming much less involved because, for the most part, the organized Jewish community has not yet found a way to connect with them. Unfortunately, the number of less involved Jews far exceeds the number of involved Jews. We must do something about this situation before there are no Jews left except for the Orthodox and small and diminishing remnants of the non-Orthodox. If we, at the OU, restrict our involvement and programming only to our own constituency, we will be missing the opportunity to do our part in fighting these dismal trends.

Of course, the OU's National Conference of Synagogue Youth (NCSY) has excelled in *kiruv* (outreach to the non-Orthodox) for years and has introduced countless young men and women to the beauty of Shabbat observance and the

Torah lifestyle. With the recent appointment of NCSY's new national director, Zale Newman, we are, in fact, increasing our commitment to NCSY so as to build on these successes; NCSY's greatest successes in outreach are yet to come.

We must realize, however, that there are substantial numbers of young Jews who are so detached from their religion that NCSY, with its foundation in Jewish texts and observance, would not appeal to them. Some new method must be found to introduce these teenagers to their heritage and to encourage them to marry someone Jewish.

In fact, the OU has already found that new method: it is called Jewish Student Union (JSU).

JSU was born out of a 2001 decision of the United States Supreme Court that reaffirmed the right of religious

groups to operate clubs in public schools. The case was brought by Evangelical Christians, and their victory opened the public schools to their clubs.

Rabbi Steve Burg, the dynamic director of the NCSY West Coast Region, saw that Jewish students would be attracted to these Christian clubs, at a potentially great cost to the Jewish people. Rabbi Burg also reasoned that if Christians could establish these clubs in public schools, so could Jews. Aware that only 5,000 out of the 30,000 Jewish teenagers in Los Angeles had any religious affiliation, Rabbi Burg established JSU for the purpose of setting up public school clubs, first in high schools in Los Angeles and later in high schools across the country.

In Los Angeles, JSU has formed clubs in prestigious schools throughout the area, including Beverly Hills High School, North Hollywood High School and Santa Monica High School, with a total of more than 1,000 students in sixteen schools. The program has since expanded to Seattle, Cleveland, St. Louis, Detroit, New York City, Westchester, New York, Long Island, New York and South Florida. In the few short months since becoming a national movement, JSU has started dozens of clubs and recruited hundreds of teens. The clubs meet during lunch period under the direction of an advisor who is specially trained in outreach.

The motto of these clubs may very well be, "Serve pizza, and they will come." Except for staff, the largest expense of JSU is pizza—perhaps the only kosher meal many JSU club members will eat that week. Discussions are usually not based on Torah texts but on the concept of being Jewish. One week the topic might be the Jewish idea of the afterlife; the next week, Israel. Club members might ask about sin, about love, about why it's necessary to fast on Yom Kippur.

The advisors never talk down to club members. With grace and humor, they answer their questions. Throughout, the advisors emphasize that club members must look to

marry their fellow Jews so as to preserve the Jewish people. They do not condemn intermarriage—as it is likely that some of the club members may themselves be the children of intermarried parents—but they emphasize the obligation of Jews to marry other Jews and the beauty of the Jewish home.

Will this work? Will JSU help to preserve the Jewish people? We must continue the process to find out.

The OU is not in this effort alone. The major initial financial support for JSU on the West Coast came from visionary philanthropists, Rachel and Jack Gindi of Los Angeles. The leadership of JSU Chairman Jason Ciment of Los Angeles exemplifies lay involvement in the program. The Federation movement, starting in Los Angeles and spreading across the country, is getting behind JSU and is providing some funding as well. A major hurdle for the OU has been to persuade the Federations and other potential partners that the objective of JSU is not specifically to make these young people Orthodox but to keep them Jewish. That is the goal, and we are very serious about it.

In the past it might have been unheard of for the president of the Orthodox Union to throw his full and enthusiastic support behind a program, based in the public schools, that does not seek to promote Orthodoxy directly. Surely, this is an unorthodox approach for the OU. But these are times of great demographic peril for our people, and traditional methods must be supplemented by new, non-traditional approaches.

NCSY will always be a major OU priority, and one of NCSY's goals will always be to introduce non-Orthodox youth to Torah Judaism. But working alongside NCSY and learning from its methods of informal Jewish education, JSU has been established to reach those who otherwise would be lost to Judaism. If we don't reach them now, perhaps we never will.

Bring the pizza. They will come. 

