



INVESTING IN TOMORROW'S RITUALS: A DIALOGUE

by FELICIA HERMAN and RACHEL BRODIE

New rituals often emerge through a combination of grass roots ingenuity, inspiration and collective will — but for rituals to attain broader acceptance, it helps to have resources and support. With this in mind, we asked the directors of Natan and Jewish Milestones to discuss the process of formulating and funding new rituals aimed at empowering individuals and enriching Jewish life.

Jewish Milestones is a nonprofit organization focusing on making lifecycle rituals accessible to a broad spectrum of Jews. Natan, a consortium of young philanthropists that favors innovative Jewish programming, is now supporting Jewish Milestones through its “Advancing Inclusiveness in the North American Jewish Community” grant committee.

FELICIA HERMAN OF NATAN:

I'm glad that we have the opportunity to talk about philanthropy and funding organizations like Jewish Milestones. It's exciting to talk about this with you as a new Natan grantee, because I think that funding access to Jewish rituals needs a new conceptual framework that I really learned about through talking to you during the application process.

What we loved about Jewish Milestones is that while your work definitely falls into Natan's grantmaking category of making the Jewish community more welcoming and accessible to traditionally marginalized groups, the conceptual framework that underpins your work has helped enrich our thinking about “inclusiveness” more generally. In particular, you start from the data that shows that at any point in time, most American Jews don't belong to synagogues. Yet, as you've shown, when it comes to marking the important moments in their lives, many wish to do so through Jewish rituals. And so you truly meet them where they are — outside of traditional institutional frameworks like synagogues — and work with them one-on-one, rather than undertaking the difficult (albeit important) job of trying to change the institutions themselves.

This is a really simple conclusion, in a way. Rather than saying “people aren't joining synagogues — let's fix synagogues!” or “people aren't joining synagogues — they need more Jewish education,” you just accept the

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reality and work with it. How did you come to this conclusion? I imagine you must have thought about it for a good long time.

RACHEL BRODIE OF JEWISH MILESTONES:

As a Jewish educator living in the Bay Area, where fewer than 20 percent of the Jews identify as synagogue members, I was facing the reality, as you described it, on a daily basis. In fact, the catalyst for creating Jewish Milestones was my own experiences with self-described “bad Jews.” By this they mean that they don’t follow Jewish ritual laws, such as keeping kosher or attending prayer services regularly — not, as I am quick to point out, that they are especially unethical, selfish or apathetic. These Jews felt lost, unworthy or unwelcome in traditional Jewish institutions, never more so than when they expressed interest in bringing Judaism into their lives at key lifecycle moments. Jewish Milestones was born of a desire to meet the needs of *any* Jew, regardless of affiliation, who wishes to access his or her heritage at life’s most critical junctures, such as the experience of birth and death.

Helping Jewish institutions be more welcoming is a critical task, and one that, under the banner of “outreach,” has garnered significant communal resources. Yet, if the revitalization and sustainability of Judaism and the development of positive Jewish identity is your ultimate goal, then one of the significant limitations of an institution-based strategy is that it comes from a very narrow and particular view of what it means to be a “good Jew” — which, even in its broadest sense, is usually defined by affiliation with Jewish communal organizations.

The funders of Jewish Milestones don’t see inclusivity as a one-way street, a way to encourage those on the outside to come inside. Rather, they look at Jewish life today

from 15,000 feet and see Jews all across the landscape, some affiliated, some not, and then promote projects that will help *any* of these Jews access meaningful experiences of Judaism. Promoting inclusivity then means encouraging Jews to feel included in *Judaism* — not by privileging those who do so only within specific contexts, but by helping all Jews become insiders to the tradition.

FH: I like that idea of looking at Jewish life today from 15,000 feet. One of the real intellectual pleasures of working on the funding side is having access to so many ideas all at once through the applications we get each year and through the various organizations (40 this year) that Natan members decide to support. It definitely gives one a view of the landscape that is rare and very inspiring.

So from that vantage point, it strikes me that many of the organizations that Natan members are identifying as worth building for the future are organizations that empower individual Jews to make their own Jewish choices. Rabbi Elie Kaunfer of Mechon Hadar has a new book coming out on this very topic, *Empowered Judaism* (Jewish Lights, 2010). That’s helped to crystallize my thinking on this topic.

With access to resources (and the internet makes providing access and retrieving information easy and cheap in a way that is historically unprecedented), and often with a bit of guidance from people who know Judaism well, individual Jews can construct Jewish lives and Jewish communities of their own. One certainly sees this in the independent *minyan* phenomenon, which is primarily what Elie discusses in his book. But it’s a common way of thinking among many organizations that Natan supports and other organizations founded in the last decade or so. These organizations seem to be in the business of providing people with access to Jewish content and

ideas — to Jewish options — but they’re pretty hands-off about the ways that users opt to utilize that content. This is not a new dynamic, though it is a complex one for a religion so associated with law and authority.

I’m wondering how this plays out at Jewish Milestones. You are definitely empowering users to make Jewish rituals their own. But I’m wondering what the role is, then, of authority. Where do you draw the line — if you draw lines at all — on empowering people to build their own Jewish rituals? What’s the role of the rabbi in this scenario? What’s the role of the community?

RB: You’ve identified the top two issues we wrestle with, as do those who are challenged by our mission.

Most of the people we work with are surprised to learn that they are considered “unaffiliated” or thought to be lacking in Jewish community. In our experience, the individuals and families we work with will tell you that they are part of Jewish communities. As one of our clients described it, the difference is that “we’re not part of the official one: capital T, capital J, capital C [The Jewish Community].” These families find Jewish community elsewhere: through a rich network of friends and family; at the Jewish day school their child attends; in their local Jewish Community Center; through involvement with Jewish cultural and philanthropic organizations.

The boundaries of what constitutes any community — not just Jewish — have never been more dynamic. This itself challenges the very notion of behavioral conformity as an essential element of community. It also undermines the traditional perception of authority. In our work, when describing the boundaries of what can or cannot be done, and by whom, we acknowledge that authority is in the eye of the beholder. This is true not only for those who would follow authority but also for those who hold communal leadership positions. As my colleague, Maggid Jhos Singer, a congregational leader who is not an ordained rabbi, says, when people challenge him with “where do you get the authority to do X, Y, or Z?” he answers, “From the people who choose to be part of my congregation.”

Does this mean that anything goes? No. Our goal is to help our clients make informed decisions. We are clear that, for example, while Jewish law does not preclude a do-it-yourself baby naming, when it comes to conversion or formal divorce rituals the repercussions of not submitting to authority can be far-reaching. We have come to see that the question of “will that count (as a bar mitzvah, a Jewish wedding, etc.)?” is better understood as “who will see this as legitimate and who will not? And why does or doesn’t that matter to me?” ■