

UNCOVERING THE UN-MOVEMENT

Whether they defiantly sport Zionist tattoos or earnestly *daven* in do-it-yourself, post-denominational settings, a new breed of Jew is jolting the communal seismograph. American Judaism may never be the same as a result.

By Richard Greenberg and Debra Nussbaum Cohen

Independent-minded to a fault, these fresh-faced iconoclasts are thirsting for Jewish meaning and community.

Ophira Edut, 25, is a self-described “chunky, funky, quarter-finding, bagel-eating Jew.” Among the features on her wisecrack-studded Web site is “The Jewess is Loose!” a compendium of tales from “my Minnesota adventures as a ‘babe in goyland.’” She now lives in New York City, where she “fails to attend synagogue,” according to her online bio, “but does have her own backyard.”

And then there’s Dan Sieradski, a 26-year-old gonzo journalist, DJ, political activist, and willing refugee from New York, who proudly claims direct descent from a “radically anti-authoritarian and anarchistic” Chasidic leader of the 1800s known as the *Yid Hakodesh*, or The Holy Jew.

Sieradski, who is studying in an Israeli yeshiva and plans to make aliyah, is the founder of several Web sites of note, including *Orthodox Anarchist* (which he considers himself to be), an earnest, audacious, hip-hop-inflected venue for leftist venting, Torah-based ruminations, and heartfelt expressions of love for the Jewish people.

Finally, Gina Kaufmann has no Web site—not yet—but she shares some of the same qualities as Edut and Sieradski, minus their brash outspokenness. A 28-year-old coffee-house *barista* and arts columnist for an alternative newspaper in Kansas City, Mo., Kaufmann is unaffiliated but proudly Jewish—a spiritual seeker who finds comfort and meaning mainly in the cultural aspects of Judaism.

Last fall, she organized an offbeat, Jewish storytelling exhibition in her hometown that fused performance art and oral histories. It drew a standing-room-only crowd to a grungy, rock ‘n’ roll bar on a weekday night. Many of the attendees were Jews who were eager to explore their heritage from an alternative perspective, including one guy who

drove for nearly two hours to get to the event. “As naïve and narcissistic as it seems,” Kaufmann says, “I was shocked to discover that I was not the only one.”

Indeed, she is not. Throughout America, young Jews are reclaiming their heritage on their own terms. That’s not to say that the well-chronicled problems of alienation among Gen X and Gen Y Jews (mostly 20- and 30-somethings) have abated. But a new grassroots narrative is unfolding that tells a more nuanced story.

The protagonist of this story is a new breed of American Jew. Independent-minded to a fault, these fresh-faced iconoclasts are thirsting for Jewish meaning and community, even though their definition of those terms often differs radically from the commonplace. Even though they often are ambivalent about the nature of their Jewish identity. Bypassing mainstream institutions, they are fashioning boutique Judaisms of their own. And in the process, they have morphed from a curiosity into a formidable force—and no wonder. For better or worse, they may be redefining American Judaism.

May every day in the New Year
be filled with health and happiness,
joy and abundant peace, and prosperity

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B'NAI B'RITH INTERNATIONAL

THE COMPONENTS OF AN UN-MOVEMENT

Time was when American Jews were a fairly homogeneous lot. As recently as two decades ago, most of them fit fairly neatly into a handful of identity categories.

In contrast, today's New Jew is a walking riot of diversity, representing a group that stubbornly defies pigeonholing—an un-movement populated by budding Yiddishists, green Jews, hip-hop Jews, Metrodix Jews, tattoo Jews, post-denominational Jews, transgender Jews, Internet-wired Jews, T-shirt Jews, do-it-yourself Jews, and Jews that fit into none of those categories. Or into many of them at once.

"I know someone who is bisexual, an anti-Occupation activist and an observant Jew who keeps kosher, goes to shul every day, puts on tefillin, and gets his value system from Judaism," says Sieradski. "What's his identity? Which slot does he fit into?"

(As for Sieradski, he considers himself primarily a Jew, but is continually struggling to reconcile the often competing values of Democracy with the Torah. "I'm trying to forge a personal theology," he explains, noting that his stage name is Mobius [as in the famous twisted strip] to signify his obsession with paradoxes.)

One of the hallmarks of The New Jews is their fluid approach to religious identity and their disdain for restrictive labels—especially those applied by their elders, whose validation is not considered essential.

"We don't need anyone telling us how to be Jewish," cautions Aaron Bisman, 25, co-founder of the non-profit Jewish record label JDub. "We are already empowered."

Demographically, philosophically, and religiously, The New Jews have little in common with Jews born as late as the 1960s. In truth, some of the differences are merely stylistic. And some of the newcomers' apparently revolutionary approaches do echo innovations from earlier eras. But many other contrasts are substantive and reflect a fundamental change in the Jewish landscape over the last few decades.

The New Jews, for example, are more likely than their predecessors to have only one Jewish parent, and may themselves be inter-

married. The 2000-2001 National Jewish Population Survey reported that 41 percent of Jews younger than 35 are intermarried, compared to only 20 percent for those 55 and older. And those younger Jews who marry out (or have a parent who did) expect not to be marginalized because of that fact.

Unlike many of their forerunners, The New Jews may be non-white or multi-racial, and they typically have many non-Jewish friends. In short, they are more fully integrated into the wider American culture than any other generation of Jews.

On one hand, these demographic realities have engendered a progressive, open-minded outlook that discourages clannishness. On the other hand, these same influences have sparked a resurgence of particularism among young Jews. Their quest to reconnect with their dormant roots is a reaction, in part, to their complete and unqualified acceptance into mainstream America, according to several seasoned observers.

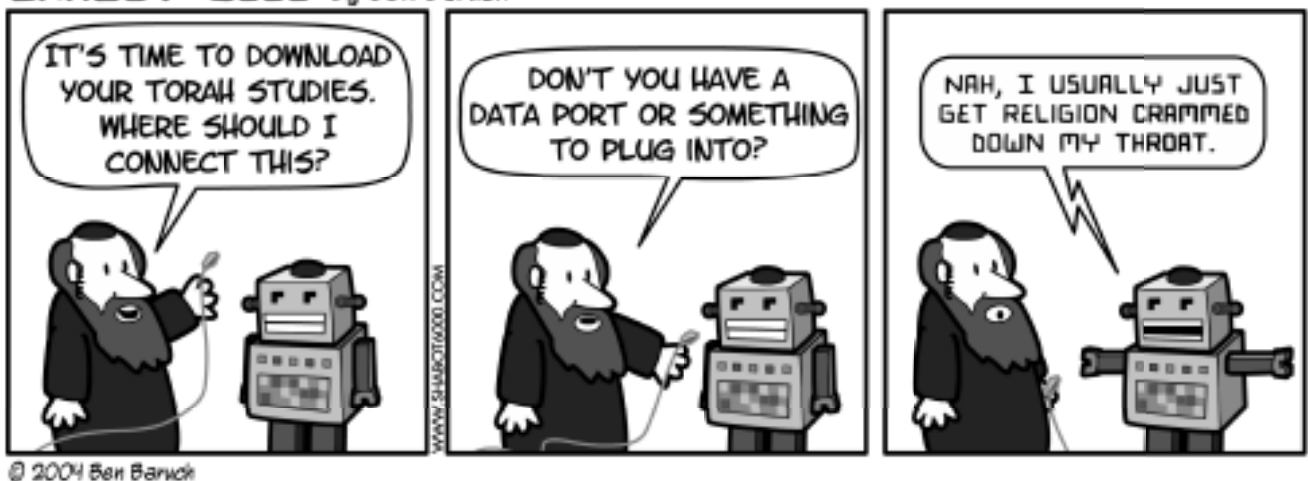
"Unlike previous generations, they are not trying to prove their Americanism," explains Rabbi Leon Morris, director of the Skirball Center for Adult Jewish Learning in New York. "They are so thoroughly American that they are now looking for ways to identify as Jews."

If the self-image of The New Jew is largely divorced from fears of discrimination and persecution, neither is it dependent on unquestioning reverence for Israel, whose salad days occurred long before many of them came of age. Because their view of Israel is likely to be somewhat jaded as a result, they aren't as reticent as, say, baby boomers about publicly criticizing the Jewish state. That's assuming, of course, that they haven't already succumbed to apathy.

"I do not care about Israel," Atlanta journalist Binyamin Cohen, 30, declares flatly. "It sounds like a crazy, almost horrible thing for a Modern Orthodox person to say. But it [the founding of the Jewish state] happened more than 50 years ago, and it doesn't mean anything to me. The love of Israel is not a gene that a Jewish person is automatically born with."

Even though they may have trouble relating to Israel, many New

SHABOT 6000 by Ben Baruch



From the pen of cartoonist William Levin, 33 (AKA Ben Baruch)—a dose of bitingly irreverent New Jew-ish humor

One of the hallmarks of The New Jews is their fluid approach to religious identity and their disdain for restrictive labels.

Jews grew up Jewishly connected, having attended day schools, supplementary schools, or Jewish camps. “I’m always struck by how many of them came from fairly traditional Jewish households,” says Ari Y. Kelman, the historian of the National Museum of American Jewish History.

“And then they became refugees from the bar mitzvah factory—once the bar mitzvah was over, they were gone,” adds Rabbi Andy Bachman of Brooklyn who spends much of his time trying to gently coax disaffected Jews back into the fold.

SELF-MADE JEWS

One of the few demographic studies that examines The New Jew was conducted in 2004 on behalf of Reboot, a two-year-old, New York-based nonprofit organization devoted to maintaining the relevance of Jewish traditions.

Released this April, the study surveyed not only Gen Y Jews, but young members of other faiths as well. It found that 27 percent of respondents were comfortable with traditional forms of religious practice, another 27 percent were essentially irreligious, and 46 percent (the “undecided”) were “uncertain, yet positive about their religious identities.” The undecided respondents preferred informal religious practices over institutional involvement.

True to form, one of the distinguishing characteristics of The New Jews is their distrust of mainstream Jewish institutions (traditional synagogues included), which they regard as hidebound, impersonal, bourgeois, and generally suffocating. As a result, many of them have opted out of organized Jewish life—but not out of Judaism. They’ve fashioned their identity instead through eclectic encounters that run the gamut from sacred to secular.

Some of them bond with their heritage by gathering in small groups and engaging in do-it-yourself text study, worship, or ritual. For example, independent, egalitarian *minyanim* that cross traditional denominational boundaries are flourishing among Gen X and Gen Yers.

Free-form, rabbi-optional, and lay-driven, they might incorporate meditation or feature several musical genres during the same service, from traditional shul offerings to Debbie Friedman songs to tunes composed by the participants themselves.

One such congregation (it actually refers to itself as a community or *chavurah*) is called Kol Zimrah, and its motto is: “Meaningful prayer through music.” Founded in late 2002, Kol Zimrah grew primarily through word of mouth, and now operates in New York and Jerusalem. It has no rabbi, no denominational affiliation, and no official *siddur*, which is just as well, because Kol Zimrah prides itself on having created an environment in which participants feel comfortable reciting their own prayers, meditating silently, or even dancing to the service’s live acoustic music.

Although the new venues for worship typified by Kol Zimrah still constitute only a tiny fraction of the Jewish universe, they are growing rapidly, and presage a time in the not-distant future that conventional denominational

Judaism will be irrelevant for most young Jews, according to some observers. That day may already have arrived, according to Morris of the Skirball Center.

“Today, there are roughly 5 million denominations,” he says. “In fact, it seems sometimes that all of the compartments of Jewish life are becoming defunct.”

THE SEARCH CONTINUES

In their quest for Jewish legitimacy, some searchers have followed their *kishkes* and embraced Yiddish, a 1,000-year-old language whose fledgling renaissance has been driven largely by younger Jews who are drawn to its retro-newness and its intimations of ethnic authenticity and secularist outsider chic.

“It’s a huge shift compared to 20 years ago,” says Aaron Paley, founder and co-chair of Yiddishkayt Los Angeles, an organization devoted to promoting Yiddish culture and language. “Yiddish has incredible resonance for people in their 20s and 30s, which was completely absent in the generation above them. It’s now perceived as hip and interesting.”

Not even the most ardent Yiddishist harbors any illusions that the language will once again become the *lingua franca* of the Jews. But there’s no denying that the language strikes a chord deep within a growing number of young Jews—including hip-hop recording artist Josh Dolgin (AKA *So Called*), an unabashed atheist who has made Yiddish an integral part of his act.

Social action, much of it politically progressive, is another popular outlet for expressing Jewish values, such as the oft-invoked *tikkun olam*, or the religious obligation to heal the world. In fact, entire new “spiritual communities” have coalesced around that principle.

One such community is called Ikar (“the source” in Hebrew). Formed in 2004 by a group of Los Angeles families under the leadership of Rabbi Sharon Brous, Ikar sees “a profound connection” between prayer, study, and social action, according to its Web site, which urges its members to fight world hunger, “end the genocide in Sudan,” and “bring drinkable water to the developing world.”

Likewise, Jewishly rooted environmentalism has attracted droves of 20- and 30-somethings who are seeking an alternative to traditional forms of religious involvement.



Photo courtesy: ©JustinDawson, www.jlawsonphoto.com

An illustrated (New) Jew

“They’re looking for meaning in their lives, and many of them find it by involving themselves with an eco-justice project or simply by experiencing God on a mountaintop,” explains Barbara Lerman-Golumb, a spokesman for the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, which was formed in 1993. “Maybe it’s the fact that they don’t have to be confined by the walls of a religious institution, but there’s this sense of what God is all about and how we relate to the world.”

COOL JEWS?

All told, the options for carving out a personalized Jewish niche are limited only by the budget, political orientation, and lifestyle preference of the individuals involved.

“These people are a product of late-20th-century consumerist capitalist society,” explains Andy Bachman, the cofounder of Brooklyn Jews, an organization that uses innovative methods to engage Jews. “They are savvy consumers and very particular about their likes and dislikes. In their everyday lives, they are able to choose from a wide variety of engaging and high-quality activities. The pick-and-choose attitude applies here, too.”

The identity-building products with the highest profile and the most buzz—i.e., the ones that get the most press—are grouped under that vast umbrella known as Jewish culture, a category that offers an expansive menu of choices for ethnic self-expression,

including some offerings that critics feel are faddish and only tangentially linked to Jewish substance.

The selections (aside from Yiddishism) range from music to literature to movies to performance art to kitschy merchandise such as sloganeering T-shirts.

Today’s books of note by young Jewish authors, unlike earlier works that suffered from an assimilationist mindset, tend to feature characters who revel in their Jewishness or even wallow in it, but rarely shun it. “With Bellow or Roth, their own Jewishness was not in the forefront of their work; it was kept behind closed doors because that’s the way society was then,” notes Carolyn Starman Hessel, director of the Jewish Book Council. “But today’s authors are very comfortable with their Jewishness, and it shows in their books.”

As for today’s performance art scene, it is boisterously and unashamedly Jewish, as evidenced by a bawdy, self-consciously campy two-man show called “What I Like About Jew.” Meanwhile, Tammy Faye Starlight (the Jewish performer Tammy Lang) masquerades on stage as a proselytizing, born-again anti-semitic—Lang’s vehicle for combating actual Jew hatred and other forms of bigotry. “My ambition,” she told the publication, “is to make people excited and nauseous. And to make them think.”

Perhaps some of the same reactions have been generated by Gen X and Yers who literally wear their Jewishness on their chests.

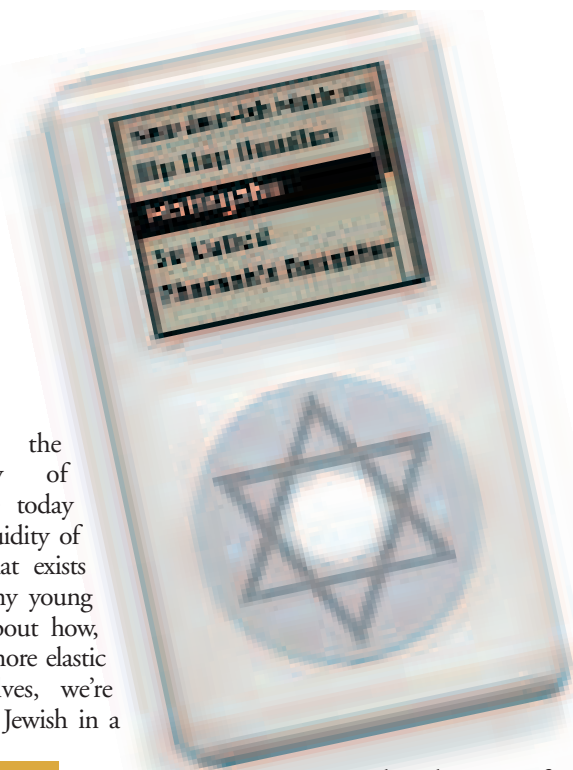
Today's Jewish cultural renaissance, as some have called it, has seen the proliferation of T-shirts emblazoned with irreverent, racy, crude, or otherwise in-your-face slogans that express Jewish pride, usually in an ironic or gently self-effacing way. (Examples: "Shalom, Mother-----" and "Moses Is My Homeboy.")

"The trend is toward a certain playfulness and a self-consciousness about ethnic tropes, sort of a post-modern interrogation of the way we construct our identity," explains Josh Neuman, 33, a graduate of Harvard Divinity School, who is now the editor of *Heeb* magazine, which many consider the flagship publication of The New Jew. In fact, *Heeb* calls itself "The New Jew Review."

Founded in early 2002, *Heeb* is a smart-alecky, sardonic, left-leaning quarterly that now reaches at least 100,000 readers, most of them secular young bicoastal urbanites who feast on an array of terminally offbeat, sometimes cringe-worthy features, including "porn star bar mitzvahs" and "yarmulkes on goyim."

The publication, which has been named one of the 50 best mag-

azines exploring the complexity of Jewish life today and the fluidity of identity that exists for so many young people—about how, with our more elastic Jewish selves, we're able to be Jewish in a



much wider range of contexts and still be modern."

To obliquely illustrate the point, consider the Hebrew Hammer, the lead character in a farcical 2003 independent film of the same name that parodied the blaxploitation flicks of the early 1970s and gleefully skewered every Jewish stereotype imaginable. A Jewish private detective in the Shaft mold, the Hammer (AKA Mordechai Jefferson Carver) carries a chip on his shoulder and drives a baby-blue Cadillac with a white fur interior and a Star of David hood ornament.

But he is a multi-dimensional Jew, not just a tough guy. While capable of casually blowing away the denizens of a skinhead bar (after brazenly ordering a "Manischewitz, straight up"), the Hammer also whines habitually,

sniffs antihistamines off the surface of his *chai* to ward off allergies, and continually fights a losing battle against his ridiculously overbearing mother.

Cool and uncool at the same time, The Hebrew Hammer is The New Jew.

So is Riqi Kosovske, a 35-year-old rabbinical student in Los Angeles, who has a *hamsa* tattooed on her ankle. The hand-shaped Jewish good-luck symbol is a constant reminder of her struggle to incorporate both "traditional Judaism and creative, expressive spirituality" in her life, according to an article appearing last year on the Web site *SomethingJewish*.

Kosovske is one of a growing number of young Jews who defiantly display Jewish-themed tattoos as a religious statement or an act of ethnic solidarity, despite the fact that Jewish law expressly prohibits the practice. "There are many things in the Torah that I don't agree with 100 percent or don't fit with me," Kosovske was quoted as saying. "You really have to check in with yourself and check in with God."

All told, the options for carving out a personalized Jewish niche are limited only by the budget, political orientation, and lifestyle preference of the individuals involved.

azines in America by the *Chicago Tribune*, has even warranted on-the-air mention several times by that national arbiter of pop-culture cool, Jon Stewart, host of Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*. (Not everyone is a *Heeb* fan, though. The Anti-Defamation League blasted the magazine last year for its allegedly blasphemous parody of Mel Gibson's film "The Passion of the Christ," and *Heeb's* publicist quit over the issue. The ADL's national director, Abraham Foxman, had earlier slammed the magazine for its provocative name, accusing *Heeb* of trying to attract attention by "using an epithet that is insensitive to Jews.")

All told, *Heeb* has left a pretty deep imprint for an upstart publication with only two full-time staffers who work out of largely donated office space. In fact, according to several breathless media accounts, the magazine is largely responsible for ushering in the era of the "cool Jew"—the hip, swaggering, non-neurotic successor to the stereotypical urban nebbish popularized by Woody Allen.

"Cool is such a small part of it," Neuman counters sharply. "Cool doesn't do justice to the phenomenon. What we're about is



Photo courtesy: Michale Daitkash

Young devotees of Rabbi Dovi Scheiner gather in a Lower East Side loft over hot dogs and hamburgers.

THE SOUND SCENE

For many New Jews, the gateway to *Yiddishkeit* is contemporary Jewish music, which Bisman of JDub Records sees as a vehicle for “taking ownership of Jewish culture” while generating mass appeal among all audiences. Sure enough, what was once a niche genre with a reputation for corniness, has grown enormously in terms of quality, variety, and popularity in recent years.

Largely a product of cross-cultural fusion, today’s Jewish music often melds indigenous Jewish themes and styles (klezmer, wordless Chasidic *niggunim*, and Middle Eastern-Sephardic sounds, for instance) with an array of contemporary non-Jewish forms, ranging from rock to reggae to punk to hip-hop to jazz-fusion.

The Hip Hop Hoodios, for example, bill themselves as a “Latino-Jewish rap collective” (Hoodios is a take-off on the Spanish word for Jew), and enthusiastically promote a rowdy blend of tolerance, salsa, and Jewish pride. (In fact, band members openly disdain musicians who don’t publicly embrace their Jewishness.) During a recent performance at a New York club catering to young Jews, lead singer Josh Norek (the self-styled “psycho-Semitic manic Hispanic”), jumped up and down as he exhorted the crowd with this Jewish-pride mantra: “Wave your nose in the air! Wave it like

you just don’t care!”

The Jewish music scene has produced an unlikely crossover sensation, a towering young Chasidic singer named Matisyahu (AKA Matthew Miller), who combines reggae, rock, *niggunim*, overtly religious Jewish themes, and rap-style scat-singing known as *beat-box*. Matisyahu, 26, has sold out arenas from coast to coast (including those in areas with few Jews), and even appeared on network television (the *Jimmy Kimmel Live* show)—presumably the first time in TV history that a traditionally garbed Jew with a long beard has ever graced a late-night couch.

It’s tempting to attribute Matisyahu’s success mainly to the novelty of his act (he does present a striking set of contrasts), but the widespread critical acclaim he has garnered argues persuasively against that. He often performs in hip clubs and other decidedly secular venues before mixed crowds that occasionally include fellow black-hatted Chasidim.

Recalling one such visit, Bisman, who doubles as Matisyahu’s manager, terms it “totally strange and surreal . . . but very cool.”

Matisyahu’s performances also attract unaffiliated Jews who might be hesitant to attend a designated Jewish event that is agenda-driven and blessed by a mainstream Jewish institution. “People

come and stay for all kinds of reasons—the intensity and the uniqueness of the event; it’s high quality and it’s fun,” explains Bisman. “But it also enables people to be aware of their Jewishness . . . and it’s not a singles event.”

JEWISHNESS IS IN THE AIR

A child of the Internet, The New Jew has access to the most powerful engine in history for incubating ideas, disseminating them, connecting like-minded people, and facilitating independent action. This fact alone represents a watershed distinction between the Jews of this generation and their predecessors.

“The Internet is a perfect metaphor for today’s Jews,” says Kelman of the National Museum of Jewish American History. “It plugs into the do-it-yourself model. Anybody can have a blog [a Web log] or set up a Web site, and there are no rules on the Internet, no licenses or channels. There’s so much Jewish stuff out there now, and whoever generates it can bypass the mainstream institutions if they want to.”

Not surprisingly, the Net is crackling with Jewish conversations emanating from countless Web sites and blogs representing every conceivable Jewish niche, from dating to kosher food to Jewish stamp collecting to Jewish rockers. The International Jewish Conspiracy site deftly lampoons one of the world’s most enduring antisemitic canards. (Appropriating anti-Jewish slurs and turning them back on themselves seems to be a trademark of this generation.)

Generation J, a popular site geared specifically to unaffiliated young Jews, recently featured a review of a hands-on guide for planning “a creative Jewish wedding.”

Bangitout.com makes its mark by fondly mocking the lifestyle of another variety of New Jew—Modern Orthodox 20-somethings who are clustered on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Binyamin Cohen, writing for the Web site *Jewcy*, calls them “the Metrodox,” and contends that they have invented “their own unique brand of Judaism” that combines rigorous religious observance, club-hopping, and physical relationships with the opposite sex. “It’s like a Jewish Melrose Place,” he says.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

The New Jew, while unique in many respects, is carrying on a legacy of iconoclasm, radical innovation, and renewal that dates to the arrival of Jews in America some 350 years ago. That legacy is the theme of historian Jonathan Sarna’s 2004 book, “American Judaism: A History.”

Among the catalysts discussed in the book is the chavurah movement. It was launched in the 1960s by spiritual searchers who sought to de-institutionalize Judaism by tapping into the informal, do-it-yourself, countercultural ethos of that era.

Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach (1925-1994), was another noteworthy innovator. He performed regularly at Greenwich Village coffeehouses, preached social justice and egalitarianism, and synthesized disparate musical forms to the delight of his huge circle of followers.

The competing emphasis of New Jew-ism on self-actualization and personal autonomy does smack of self-indulgence, and that calls into question its staying power.

Ultimately, both the chavurah movement and Carlebach helped change the face of conventional Judaism in subtle but meaningful ways that resonate to this day.

While the legacy of New Jew-ism remains to be forged, its influence has already registered in the larger Jewish world. Some mainstream organizations have responded by ramping up their efforts to connect with young Jews through contemporary music offerings and community-based outreach programs that seek to convey an aura of hipness, informality, and approachability.

Over the past four years, for example, the music-publishing arm of the Union for Reform Judaism has issued a succession of CDs, the Ruach series, featuring what it dubs “the newest and coolest Jewish rock music from North America and Israel.”

The four-year-old Riverway Project in Boston—sponsored by a member of Temple Israel, which is affiliated with the Reform movement—spends roughly \$200,000 each year to target disconnected, politically progressive 20- and 30-somethings who, according to the project’s organizers, want to commune with Judaism on their terms, not those of their parents. Recognizing that some participants may balk at entering a synagogue, the Riverway Project offers them the opportunity to study and worship (for free) at neighbors’ homes. Riverway’s program this past Purim was an appropriately hip and edgy production titled “*esther ’05: A Cabaret Rock Opera*.”

The pressure to accommodate The New Jew has been felt at the opposite end of the denominational spectrum, as well. Some liberal segments of Orthodoxy (“Open Orthodoxy” is the term of choice) have incorporated pluralistic and egalitarian elements, such as an expanded role for women in prayer services and communal leadership.

In keeping with this trend, a staunchly open-Orthodox yeshiva, the non-affiliated Yeshivat Chovevei Torah—the first institution of its kind—was founded in 2000 in New York, and has grown rapidly with the help of key philanthropists. Chovevei Torah, whose annual operating budget has climbed to \$2.3 million, has graduated 20 rabbis, all of whom have been placed in leadership positions at various Jewish institutions around the United States.

Elsewhere, outreach projects targeted at Gen X and Yers have been underwritten by major Jewish funders, both private and com-



One of many provocative Web sites found in the bustling Jewish blogosphere.

munal, although their contributions, for the most part, are still relatively modest. One of the most innovative such endeavors is Reboot, an estimated \$800,000-per-year operation that was founded in 2003 by the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies and Steven Spielberg’s Righteous Persons Foundation.

Reboot now operates a ring of North American salons where young, synagogue-averse Jews can nosh, imbibe, and freely discuss topics of interest to them. Reboot also plans to soon unveil a quarterly journal called *Guilt & Pleasure*, a forum for accomplished writers and other creative artists who will explore the theme of Jewish identity and related topics. Reboot film, records, and book projects are also in the works.

The Commission on Jewish Identity and Renewal (COJIR), an arm of the UJA-Federation of New York, is spending \$546,000 this year on an array of non-traditional identity-building projects, ranging from Andy Bachman’s Brooklyn Jews to Hazon (an environmental group) to Kehilat Hadar (an independent, egalitarian *minyán* in New York).

Meanwhile, networks of young Jewish philanthropists have been assembled to fund bold and innovative initiatives, including those that seek to engage young Jews alienated from organizational life. One such network is Natan (“give” in Hebrew), a two-year-old foundation that awarded grants totaling \$400,000 in its inaugural year.

Natan’s grantees have included Avodah: The Jewish Service

Corps (a social-justice-oriented fellowship for young Jews), Storahelling (a self-described “radical fusion of storytelling, Torah, traditional ritual theater, and contemporary performance art”), *Heeb* magazine, and JDub Records, which received \$40,000 in 2003.

This money is an investment in the Jewish future. It will pay dividends only if this evolving new approach to Judaism proves to be more than an exotic fad, and that remains an open question. Jonathan Sarna says he is skeptical about the viability of cultural Judaism as a vehicle for “keeping Jews Jewish” from generation to generation, and he’s not alone.

“That’s a fair critique,” says Andy Bachman, who adds, however, that aspects of New Jew-ism do routinely blend cultural and religious elements. “It’s not necessarily measurable in either-or terms.”

Contemporary Jewish music, for example, commonly mixes the two, which makes it a particularly non-threatening potential portal of entry for disaffected, religion-wary young Jews. No doubt some of them have felt a surge of ethnic pride while witnessing a Jewishly informed performance that also seriously rocks the house. But it’s anybody’s guess how often that heady encounter in a noisy and sweaty downtown club has lasting Jewish impact.

Another great unknown: Assuming that the various independent spiritual communities continue to proliferate, will they imperil the mainstream movements and ultimately emerge as the new model of American Judaism? Or will they spur the old guard to adapt to changing times by incorporating the best practices of the newbies?

“Competition strengthens the marketplace, and this is a classic grassroots challenge,” Steve Bayme, national director of contemporary Jewish life for the American Jewish Committee, told *The [New York] Jewish Week* in 2002. “The establishment is not so stodgy that it can’t respond.”

The catalyst triggering that response, it should be apparent by now, is not a monolith, but rather a constellation of sometimes radically contradictory beliefs, practices, theories, and affiliations. On one hand, New Jew-ism is a wholesome patchwork of eclecticism, egalitarianism, deeply felt spirituality, and social activism. But its competing emphasis on self-actualization and personal autonomy does smack of self-indulgence, and that calls into question its staying power.

When asked about this dichotomy, Morris of Skirball points out that the worship of individualism could undermine the consensus-driven Jewish communal model symbolized by the Federation system, an institution that is already considered irrelevant by many independent-minded young Jews.

“That probably reveals the darker side of the self-oriented approach to Judaism,” Morris concedes, but his tone shifts to one of exasperation as he notes that some conservative commentators seem to have fixated on this point. They have bemoaned the fact, he says, that religious life in America in general is increasingly focused on the self.

“That diagnosis might be correct,” he adds, “but the cure is not to bemoan this fact, but to use the self as a starting point to get people involved in the community in hopes that they will move beyond the self.” He pauses. “I mean, what’s the alternative?” 🌟