

The background of the entire page is a close-up photograph of a loom. The threads are arranged in neat, horizontal rows on white bobbins. The colors are vibrant and varied, including shades of blue, green, yellow, orange, red, and purple. The lighting is bright, highlighting the texture of the threads.

LEGWORK, FRAMEWORK, ARTWORK

Engaging the
Next Generation
of Jews

A REPORT ON
ROSE COMMUNITY FOUNDATION'S
NEXT GENERATION INITIATIVE

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Rose Community Foundation

Based on research conducted
by Shawna Friedman
and Ari Y. Kelman

ROSE
COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

Rose Community Foundation has coined “NextGen” to refer to the cohort of people aged 21 to 40 who actually make up parts of two generations: Millennials and Generation X.

Shawna Friedman and Ari Y. Kelman would like to extend many thanks to all of the NextGen Jews who gave so generously of their time and ideas during the research process. The thoughtful engagement of these individuals and their willingness, enthusiasm and honesty have helped to shape not only this report, but the ongoing work of Rose Community Foundation’s Next Generation Initiative. The voices included in this report belong to a number of exceptional people whose thoughts and attitudes we have tried to represent here. Any shortcomings belong to the authors alone.

Special thanks also go to: Roger Bennett, Rachel Levin and Sharna Goldseker; to Simon Greer, Amichai Lau-Lavie, David Shneer and Jane Steinberg for their help with the Estes Park summit; and last but not least to Stacy Abramson and Jules Shell for all of their continued assistance.





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Jewish world at the beginning of the 21st century is a diverse and complex place to work. The stakes for Jewish communal life are high, and many organizations in America are seeking ways to engage a generation that has demonstrated its reticence to join formal Jewish communities. *Legwork, Framework, Artwork* provides an in-depth case study of one community area, Denver/Boulder, and one foundation within Denver/Boulder, Rose Community Foundation, that has begun to respond successfully to these changes.

Legwork, Framework, Artwork frames Rose's NextGen Initiatives within broad national trends and highlights the specific responses of the Foundation to these trends. In-depth interviews with approximately 220 NextGen Jews in Denver/

Boulder provide rich ethnographic data on the attitudes, behaviors and desires of this population and suggest new possibilities for mobilizing it.

The single most powerful tool that the Foundation discovered for building connections with NextGen Jews was conversation. Doing the **legwork** necessary to engage people one-on-one in substantive conversations about their lives, concerns, attitudes and desires proved to be an essential vehicle for learning more about NextGen Jews and a means of building relationships that could be mobilized. By recognizing that these individuals are the experts on their generation's Jewish identities, and by treating them as such, the Foundation was able both to establish meaningful relationships and to learn new and innovative methods of

working effectively with them. The relationships established through these conversations became the glue and the fuel for a **network** of individuals who would have otherwise remained disconnected from one another.

By approaching the community mobilization as process-oriented **artwork** rather than goal-oriented “outreach,” Rose had flexibility to respond to new discoveries and to react to patterns of Jewish engagement that it observed among this demographic. Some of the key discoveries about NextGen Jews are that they share:

- strong, positive, Jewish identities
- powerful connections to family
- high percentages of interfaith marriages
- diverse social networks
- a sense of alienation from and dissatisfaction with Jewish organizations
- the commitment to creating their own Jewish experiences
- broad social awareness

[INVOLVING THEM] IS A SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGE BECAUSE YOUNGER JEWS SEEM RETICENT TO TAKE THEIR PLACE AT THE COMMUNAL TABLE. IT IS, HOWEVER, ALSO AN OPPORTUNITY FOR AMERICAN JEWISH INSTITUTIONS TO RETHINK THEIR ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES WITH RESPECT TO THEIR FUTURE AND THE FUTURE OF JEWS IN AMERICA.

These characteristics pose challenges to the ways in which conventional Jewish organizations and funders have sought to engage younger Jews. The inherited wisdom of Jewish organizations is being put to the test by a generation with more diverse social networks and broader social horizons. This diversity means that engagement in exclusively Jewish organizations is no longer automatic for this generation. For Jewish organizations to continue to thrive, they must not only develop relationships with a cohort of younger Jews, but be prepared to recalibrate the meaning and measures of Jewish work in order to respond to current American Jewish social trends.

Intermarriage, disaffiliation and other trends are demographic realities. Calling these trends, or the people those statistics represent, “problems” will not encourage them to participate in Jewish life; communicating the meaning and substance of an institution may give NextGen Jews positive reasons to become involved. For philanthropists, this means reconsidering the landscape of Jewish life to include a **patchwork** of diverse Jewish opportunities and a **framework** for supporting them.

Rose Community Foundation’s Next Generation Initiative set out to change the culture of Jewish life for people in their 20s and 30s in Denver/Boulder. Changing culture is a long and slow process. *Legwork, Framework, Artwork* documents the Foundation’s efforts and shares some of its experience as a starting point for actively undertaking change on both communal and organizational levels. As organizations and funders consider their approaches to working with the NextGen population, they are not only encouraged to listen closely to the people they want to engage, but to dedicate resources towards substantive changes to the nature of the work they do.

ONE

THE LONG VIEW Anxiety and Experimentation

THE NATIONAL PICTURE: CRISIS OR OPPORTUNITY

Since the late 1960s, American Jews have been experiencing a number of significant trends that are poised to dramatically alter Jewish life in America. Recent research has shown convincingly that these trends reflect deep changes that are not only attitudinal, but that will have long-ranging effects on Jewish individuals, communities and institutions. Far more than the product of technology, or tensions born of generational shifts, these trends pose exciting challenges to Jewish communal organizations as well as to the people whose energy and passion are directed toward the improvement of Jewish life.

Briefly, these trends include the following: marriages between Jews and non-Jews, which had reached around 22 percent for the preceding generation, currently hover around 50 percent nationwide (*National Jewish Population*, 2003; Ukeles, et al., 2007). American Jews, like other Americans of this generation, are marrying later and having fewer children than preceding generations (Wuthnow, 2007). Israel, long a galvanizing force for American Jewry, no longer holds the place it once did in the hearts and minds of American Jews. Synagogue membership and financial contributions to Jewish organizations are also experiencing a general decline (Cohen and Kelman, 2007b). Denominational affiliation, too, is in decline; greater numbers of younger Jews are identifying as “just Jewish” – instead of Reform, Conservative or Reconstructionist – than in the past (Cohen, et al., 2007).

With unparalleled access to mainstream social and professional life in America, Jewish communal affiliation cannot be taken for granted. Despite the benefit of fuller integration into American society, it poses significant challenges to organized American Jewish life.

Other generational differences can be seen not only in terms of attitudes, but also in demographics. The flexibility of religious patterns of affiliation, the delayed onset of marriage and the prevalence of diverse social networks are all characteristic of the American generation currently in its 20s and 30s (Greenberg, 2005; Pew, 2008). In this way, they bear a closer resemblance to other Americans of this generation than they do to the generation of Jews who preceded them. This nationwide generational shift is having dramatic effects on Jewish communities and the organizations that serve them.

What these changes mean and what American Jewry will look like in the future remains to be seen. Jews and Jewish organizations across the country are involved in efforts to revitalize themselves and their communities. Jewish institutions are struggling to develop strategies that will engage younger Jews who are manifesting their alienation from organized Jewish life. This is a significant challenge because younger Jews seem reticent to take their place at the communal table. It is, however, also an opportunity for American Jewish institutions to rethink their roles and responsibilities with respect to their future and the future of Jews in America.

“HOW DO I TEACH MY KIDS TO BE JEWISH AND HOW TO UNDERSTAND HOW TO BE JEWISH? HOW CAN I BE INVOLVED IN JEWISH LIFE WITHOUT NECESSARILY GOING TO TEMPLE AND INTERACTING WITH THE RABBI?”

To some, the NextGen absence from traditional institutional structures signifies that this generation may be the last of the non-orthodox American Jews. This logic suggests that if these trends continue apace and intermarriage remains high, Jewish charitable giving continues to decline and membership in Jewish organizations continues to wane, then there eventually will be no communal structures remaining and no Jews left to populate them.

This anxiety is shared by many in the Jewish institutional world, such that a significant portion of the 2007 United Jewish Community’s General Assembly was dedicated to “next generation” leaders, issues and concerns (an effort that included its own Facebook group).

Similarly, the outpouring of energy, resources and research into NextGen activities, interests and issues indicates that philanthropies and Jewish organizations across the continent are concerned with these generational changes and are seeking appropriate responses. For many Jewish institutions, these efforts have taken virtually every manner of style and substance from blogging the GA, to “hookah in the sukkah” events at synagogues, to *Oneg Shabbat* gatherings with kegs of beer and live bands.

As institutions experiment with ways to understand and engage the next generation, many younger American Jews have begun creating their own opportunities for Jewish engagement that are relatively independent of existing communal organizations and institutions (Cohen and Kelman, 2007a). Recent research has shown that many among the Jewishly educated leaders of this next generation have chosen to pursue Jewish life outside of institutional structures (Cohen and Kelman, 2006; Cohen et al., 2007; Bleyer, 2007). Rather than following their parents into the halls of synagogues and federations, a significant segment of younger Jews are seeking to create new avenues of, and opportunities for, Jewish involvement that do not replicate older patterns of Jewish communal participation.

“My impression is that the older, more established, more structured Jewish things have mission statements, agendas and people who are running them. Those people wouldn’t be me and the people my age. The stuff that’s less traditional and rigid in its definition of what we are doing or why we are doing it or what’s Jewish about it – that’s always going to ultimately be more appealing to me.”¹

Salons organized to discuss Jewish topics have sprung up from San Diego to Toronto. Record labels such as JDub Records and Modular Moods are responsible for helping Jewish artists record, distribute and tour internationally. As of 2007, there are more than 80 independent minyanim [prayer communities] across the United States and Canada, the majority of which attract Jews in their 20s and 30s. Publications such as *Guilt and Pleasure and Heeb*, films such as *The Hebrew Hammer* and *Divan*, and countless works of fiction and nonfiction now populate bookshelves and film festivals, representing perhaps the most significant outpouring of explicitly Jewish culture since Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants read the *Forward* and attended the theater on Second

¹ Unless otherwise attributed, quotes in this report are drawn from interviews conducted by Shawna Friedman and Ari Y. Kelman with NextGen Jews in Denver/Boulder.

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Avenue. Whether or not this trend will continue remains to be seen, but the proliferation of options suggests that the Jewishness of this generation is not congruent with that which nourished its parent's generation.

These two simultaneous trends – a weakening of traditional communal structures and a proliferation of alternatives – are often seen as oppositional forces. They are read, alternatively, as signals of American Jewry's imminent decline or as evidence of a renaissance. Whatever one believes, neither of these trends appears poised to stop or reverse itself anytime soon. More importantly, in engaging the next generation of American Jews, neither can be simply dismissed as a passing phase nor waved away as either frivolous or a distraction.

DENVER/BOULDER: ROSE COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

The demographic picture of NextGen Jews in Jewish Denver/Boulder resembles national patterns, but three trends deserve special attention. First, in order to understand the size of the population at issue here, it should be noted that younger Jewish adults account for approximately one-quarter of the total Jewish population.² The Jewish population in Denver/Boulder grew from 38,600 in 1981 to 83,900 in 2007. Newcomers account for 46 percent of the current Jewish population. Given the large number of younger people in this population, their presence is shaping the community not just in sheer size, but through their identification and affiliation patterns as well. Second, younger people are more likely to have moved to Denver from elsewhere, which means they have fewer familial and long-term social ties. The recent *2007 Metro Denver/Boulder Jewish Community Study* illustrates that relatively new arrivals to Denver/Boulder are half as

likely to join congregations as those who have lived in the area for 10 years or more. They are also much less likely to contribute to local Jewish philanthropic causes. Since a significant percentage of these recent arrivals are under 40 years old, these figures suggest that members of this generation make up a substantial portion of those Jews who are not attached to institutions.

Third, the rate of intermarriage among people younger than 35 years old is approaching 71 percent (as opposed to 47 percent for those older than 50). This number is slightly higher than national averages and shows not only that a significant portion of Denver/Boulder Jewish families currently includes non-Jews, but also that many children will have one non-Jewish parent, a situation that affects not only family structures but also Jewish education. Of Jews under 40, 16 percent report that they live in a multi-racial household. These trends are in line with national ones, but the predominance of young Jews in the region shapes the community more dramatically than elsewhere, thus making Denver/Boulder a unique case for study.

Observing this gap in institutional involvement, Rose Community Foundation understood that Jewish life was changing. The Foundation felt it could facilitate further changes in order to enable Jews in their 20s and 30s to participate in Jewish life as and how they saw fit. Effecting change meant intervening without answers, but with a theory that could dramatically reshape the way Jewish life is lived and organized in Denver/Boulder. The Foundation's Jewish Life Committee charged Rose staff to work with young Jews in the *entire* Denver/Boulder community, including both organizations working with this demographic and those NextGen Jews who were unaffiliated. The Foundation chose to begin with NextGen members on the margins of the community since they were the least involved. Thus, in 2004, the Foundation began studying

² These statistics and all further demographic data regarding the composition of the Denver/Boulder Jewish community were drawn from the *2007 Metro Denver/Boulder Jewish Community Study* (Ukeles Associates).



approaches to working with this generation. Out of a series of meetings with Reboot, a national nonprofit dedicated to fostering a network of next-generation Jewish innovators and supporting the products this network produces, Rose developed a two-stage theory of change for working with the next generation of Jews.

First, the Foundation defined its theory of change. Lisa Farber Miller, senior program officer of Jewish Life, explains, “We believed that if we found young Jews and listened to them, ideas and leaders would emerge that would help us create a grassroots movement of young Jews ‘doing Jewish’ how they wanted to, together or individually.”

Effecting change on all these levels meant actively intervening on the level of how NextGen Jews thought, talked and acted with respect to things Jewish. In other words, the staff of Rose Community Foundation believed that significant change would have to be cultural. Noted critic Raymond Williams explained culture as a “particular way of life which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning, but also in institutions and ordinary behavior” (Williams, 1965). Cultural change is not merely a matter of adding a new program or new product, of hosting a salon, funding a film or producing a concert. Genuine cultural change requires a broader outlook, mobilizing existing communities, empowering nascent communities and stimulating organized activities for groups and individuals to create a more strategic and sustained approach. Beyond that, it also meant fostering the creation of

networks that could mobilize younger Jews to “do Jewish” however they wanted to.

Second, Rose quickly understood that ideas generated by professionals alone were never going to gain traction among NextGen Jews who were otherwise alienated from organized Jewish life. Rabbis and Jewish communal professionals, whose work is generally grounded in Jewish communities and institutions, are unlikely to become the agents of change for a population disinclined to enter synagogues or attend formal Jewish events.

Historical and national trends indicate that the most powerful changes in American Jewish life – from the first breakaway congregation in 1815 to the havurah movement in the late 1960s – have begun from the margins and worked their way toward the center rather than vice versa (Sarna, 1995; Cohen and Kelman, 2007a). The Foundation hypothesized that the margins would be the driving force for innovation and that momentum would gather outside the offices of institutions and synagogues. Change had to begin by first engaging and mobilizing the constituency that institutions were trying to serve, especially if this constituency was to be found outside the organized Jewish community.

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With these two ideas as guiding principles, it became clear very quickly that change was going to be slow and unpredictable, but that it had to begin somewhere strategic.

TWO

WHAT WE DID What We Learned and What We Did

WHAT WE DID

Acting on its theory of change, Rose hired Shawna Friedman to lead its NextGen Initiatives and contracted with Reboot to train Friedman in its version of relationship building among NextGen members. Employing Friedman was a strategic move on the part of the Foundation; hiring criteria included not only finding a smart, personable and qualified NextGen member, but someone without an institutional agenda or community pedigree.³ In training Friedman, Reboot made two suggestions:

1. **Engage in Conversations.** By doing this, Friedman would cast a broad net extending beyond the standard Jewish community. The more people you meet, the more interesting people you meet; Friedman quickly met many young Jews who were not otherwise on the Jewish communal radar.
2. **Hold a Summit** to which a small selection of people would be invited. The summit would connect individuals to one another and create a network of potential leaders via a new kind of shared Jewish experience. Additionally, the summit would catalyze interests by putting interesting people in conversation with one another. It would also allow the Foundation to gather more ideas about what NextGen members wanted. According to Reboot, strengthening these relationships would help build momentum for both Rose and for the network that Friedman had created.

Following Reboot's suggestions, Friedman began researching young Jewish life using the following approach:

- Eleven months of “intensive networking” (Friedman’s term) involved cold calls, pursuing contacts gained from friends and acquaintances and soliciting new names from these individuals as she met them. Friedman met with approximately 220 people, only seven of whom she was acquainted with before the process began.
- During each of these conversations, Friedman asked the interviewee to share Jewish stories and desires as well as concerns about Jewish life and their lives in general. These were open-ended conversations without an objective or an “ask.” Rather, they provided an opportunity for the members of Friedman’s nascent network to speak honestly about themselves, their lives and concerns.
- Building from these conversations, and with the help of Reboot, Rose held a 24-person summit at Estes Park. Attendees were chosen from among Friedman’s interviews and included a mixture of those who identified as “connected” and those who had no formal contact with the Jewish community.

³ Though Friedman had previously worked for the Boulder JCC, she was not a known figure in the Denver Jewish community and was not strongly identified institutionally in Boulder.

Friedman's work, and its success, relies on the following strategies:

1. **Meet the NextGen “Where They Are.”** This refers not only to physical location (NextGen members will talk more readily in Starbucks than in a synagogue or foundation office), but to an openness to where NextGen members are Jewishly. Friedman used her conversations to find out what people wanted from Jewish life in Denver/Boulder, but more importantly, she allowed them to talk, and she listened. By opening up these lines of communication and by asking people to talk about their Jewish lives, Friedman built individual relationships with people organically.
2. **Build Momentum from the Margin.** The common interest in being Jewish that accrues at the margins of Jewish life can help generate new ideas, directions and models for Jewish experiences. Of the 220 individuals with whom Friedman carried on conversations, there was great variation in their connection to Jewish life: some were synagogue members or on young leadership teams, and some had not had any formal contact with Jewish life since their childhood, if ever. Insofar as this variety of input was valuable, those outside the Jewish mainstream supplied an especially important perspective on the current state of Jewish identity in America because they were experts in what it meant to be Jewish and disconnected from organized Jewish life.
3. **Outreach as Organizing and the Power of Conversation.** Talking to people may be the most valuable act that communal professionals can do. It is not just an opportunity for “market research”, but it is a chance to build relationships with people, one at a time. Though labor and time intensive, it fosters the growth of a network of relationships that can become the motor for community mobilization.
4. **The Power of Connectors.** In his book *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell argues that “connectors” play a critical role in bridging different communities and spreading information. In her work with Rose Community Foundation, Shawna Friedman functions as a connector. The fact that she did not come to these conversations as the representative of a Jewish institution or as a rabbi or Jewish communal professional gave her credibility among a population that would have been skeptical of her motives had she borne a title. Similarly, the fact that she is a member of a multi-ethnic interfaith family contributed to the sense of safety and comfort that some of the interviewees felt with Friedman, perhaps reassuring some of them that she would not judge their choices.

“HAVING SHAWNA INTERVIEW ME THE FIRST TIME ACTUALLY **OPENED A LOT OF DOORS** TO A LOT OF THINGS I HADN'T EVER REALLY CONSIDERED ABOUT THE WAYS THAT JUDAISM SHAPED MY SELF-IMAGE AND IDENTITY. IT IMPACTED MY **SENSE OF CULTURE** AND BELONGING IN WAYS THAT I HADN'T EVER IDENTIFIED TO MYSELF. PROBABLY IN THE LAST YEAR I HAVE BEEN A LOT MORE THOUGHTFUL ABOUT **MY OWN JEWISH IDENTITY** THAN I HAD [FOR] MANY YEARS PRIOR.”



"THIS PART OF ME THAT HAS BEEN DORMANT FOR SO MANY YEARS COMES ALIVE AGAIN."

The Estes Park summit built on these strategies to nurture budding relationships within the community and to help the Foundation identify leaders. In order to provide maximum opportunity for summit participants to talk to one another and shape the sessions as they felt best, the summit employed "open space technology," a facilitation strategy that allows the participants to set the agenda and guide the conversations.

At the summit, Friedman observed three phenomena:

1. Even those who identified as more "connected" found themselves hungry for deeper engagement and more conversation.
2. People who thought they knew "all" of the Jews in Denver/Boulder met new Jewish people.
3. Unconnected Jews were willing to engage in Jewish conversations, illustrating that they were unconnected, but interested in engaging.

The summit was most successful in starting to create a network of younger Jews that was broader and more inclusive than previous local Jewish community networks. It also allowed the Foundation to identify people and relationships that could become loci of leadership as the Foundation moved into the next phase of organizing.

WHAT WE LEARNED

From the conversations and the summit, Rose further refined its methods based largely on the following seven findings about Denver/Boulder NextGen Jews, which parallel the broader national trends highlighted above. These findings provide a snapshot of the attitudes and experiences of NextGen Jews in Denver/Boulder and

offer insight into how they conceive of being Jewish themselves, for their families and their communities. NextGen Jews are shaped by:

- strong, positive, Jewish identities
- powerful connections to family
- high percentages of interfaith marriages
- diverse social networks
- a sense of alienation from and dissatisfaction with Jewish organizations
- the commitment to creating their own Jewish experiences
- broad social awareness

First, and most importantly, almost all of the 220 respondents articulated a *positive and proud, self-defined Jewish identity*. "I like the traditions," said one 30-year old woman. "Like when I go to my parents' house for the holidays. But I'm not religious, like practicing. I went to Hebrew School, got bat-mitzvahed, hated everything." Another spoke about his values in connection to Judaism. "When I think about my connection to Judaism, I think there are a few key values that come up. Other people who aren't Jewish have those values, but I feel like it's a part of our history of being Jewish that has helped bring those values." A third respondent observed how much he enjoyed participating in Jewish activities even though he only participated sporadically.

"I love [doing Jewish things]. It's like, wow, this part of me that has been dormant for so many years comes alive again, and I get excited. [There's] that great tribal feeling of being around my people; you just have things in common with other Jews that you don't have with other people, period."

“THERE IS THIS CULTURE OF BEING JEWISH, THE VALUES THAT YOU HOLD, SORT OF THE SPIRIT OF BEING GOOD TO ONE ANOTHER, AND I THINK A LOT OF IT REVOLVES AROUND FAMILY VALUES AND HOW YOU RELATE TO YOUR FAMILY, YOUR FRIENDS.”

Another captured perhaps the most widespread sentiment when he offered his feeling that “being Jewish is very important to me, [but] going to services is not very important to me.” This sentiment resonated among almost every respondent, as they echoed dissatisfaction with what they perceived as normative Jewish life, even while emphasizing that being Jewish seemed vital and even vibrant.

The largest source of these vital Jewish identities is family. Almost universally, NextGen respondents correlated positive Jewish memories and experiences with family, whether that meant going to synagogue as a young person, celebrating holidays at home or developing one’s value system. For example, one woman who qualified her experience by identifying herself as a Jewish “outsider” recalled, “My family is very Jewish; we have always done all the traditional holidays. I love that. I identify with that.” In a similar context, another respondent reflected on the Jewishness of the values he learned as a child. “You can almost be Jewish without practicing Judaism to some extent. There is this culture of being Jewish, the values that you hold, sort of the spirit of being good to one another, and I think a lot of it revolves around family values and how you relate to your family, your friends.” Consistent with national trends about the largely positive associations of younger Americans and their families, it is not terribly surprising that family plays a large role in cultivating and reinforcing a sense of Jewishness in both attitude and behavior (Greenberg, 2006; Howe and Strauss, 2000).

However, it must be noted that the face and structure of Jewish families is changing. Intermarriage, same-sex partnerships, single-parent families and interracial families are now highly visible in Jewish communities. The increasing absence of formal and social barriers to education and professional choices has resulted in Jewish communities gradually developing a more open attitude towards non-Jews and becoming more socially inclusive of them as a function of daily life. This has led, unsurprisingly, to an increasingly high occurrence of intimate relationships between Jews and non-Jews.

Yet, for respondents, the possibility of intermarriage demonstrated both the value of family and the strength of their own Jewish identities. Many respondents spoke of marriage not only in terms of personal choice but as one of the many Jewish decisions they were facing. The choice of partner extends beyond marrying Jew or non-Jew and becomes an opportunity to affirm or deny values within the Jewish realm as well. One respondent married a non-Jewish woman who converted and is now (to his surprise) more actively Jewish than he. Another woman said that marrying someone Jewish “didn’t used to be [important]. But now it is.” However, she added that she would not marry an Orthodox man, either, because it “wouldn’t be in line with [my] values.” Thus, the decisions about marriage reflect consideration of both specifically Jewish concerns and larger ones that are born of experiences as the “most diverse generation in American history.” Perhaps more commonly than anything else, those involved in interfaith relationships expressed that any community in which they would participate would have to consider their partners equal members.

Naturally, these intimate relationships with non-Jews extend to friendships as well. Jews under the age of 40, in line with national trends generally, have far more diverse social networks than the preceding

generation in terms of ethnicity, religion, race and sexual orientation (Greenberg, 2005; New American Media, 2007). One respondent recalled his experience growing up outside of Washington, D.C., where he had a “Jewish upbringing, but [he felt like] an outsider [among Jews].” He continued, “I didn’t have too many Jewish friends. I had more actual Palestinian friends than I did Jewish friends. And certainly more Arab friends and Muslim friends than I did Jewish friends.” Many people reported that they had very few Jewish friends in college and after. Others admitted to large circles of Jewish friends, but downplayed the role of Jewishness in their friendships, as in the comments of this respondent who recalled, “There are some [friends] who I know are Jewish; the other ones I assume are not Jewish. A lot of my friends are Jewish and we’ve met not because we’re Jewish. It just happens that we’re all Jewish. And I don’t think it’s a coincidence, but we don’t meet for Jewish purposes.” Even those with Jewish friends rarely attribute those friendships to explicitly Jewish activities or Jewish contexts. These diverse social networks contribute both to the identity formation of individuals and to how those individuals interact with Jewish communal institutions.

A sense of alienation from Jewish organizations frequently emerges from the often jarring encounter between positive associations with Jewish life (via family) and the experience of entering Jewish communal life. For a generation with diverse friendship circles, established Jewish communal structures and situations often seem, at worst, exclusive and,

at best, parochial. One young woman, who signed up for a “young professionals group,” remembers finding it unfriendly and insular.

“I signed up [through one of the large temples] and I think I went to one event. And I didn’t like it. I feel like I’m pretty social, but I feel like it was people who knew each other and who have known each other for years and their parents had grown up with each other. There was this kind of history, and it was difficult.”

Others simply find typical Jewish experiences to be boring and uninviting, as in this encapsulation of synagogue life: “Somebody greets you at the door and says, ‘I’m so happy you’re here. Here’s a prayerbook; please have a seat.’ You then sit there for an hour and 15 minutes. You don’t actually talk to anybody. And then you’re at the Oneg and that’s like being at a happy hour.”

Another, a 35-year-old Denver native, commented, “I’ll go to synagogue because it will make my mom feel good. That’s the one thing I like about going to synagogue. [But] I have a really hard time sitting still and not doing anything.”

Finding stories like these in communities across the U.S. is not difficult; there is virtually no organized Jewish event that does not have its critics and its supporters. What is important here, however, is not the negative experiences of individuals, but rather that the sense of alienation from organized Jewish life exists alongside other, more personal positive associations with Jewish life and Judaism. It would be disingenuous to say, for example, that no younger Jews attend synagogue, but even those who do generally

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do not find synagogues geared towards their demographic, nor do they find their peers there. The growth in independent minyanim and their popularity among people in their 20s and 30s suggest that it is not worship per se, but rather the formal synagogue structures that people in this demographic find an uncomfortable fit.

Rather than engage in community structures they find alienating or bland, younger Jews are organizing independently and creating ritual on their own terms, a typical expression of *Do-it-Yourself (DIY) Judaism* that bears the particular imprint of this generation's experiences and values. The following examples capture their commitments to friends and family, their rejection of institutional structures, and an expression of the values of diversity and inclusiveness.

"My sister and I had [a Passover seder] at our house. We didn't have one single Jew [among a crowd of 15]. It was awesome. It was really great. We've definitely tried to carry those on. My sister went to Africa and had a Passover seder with Malawians and ex-pats, and it was definitely an experience."

Another recalled the experience of preparing for and leading his first Passover seder. "I had the greatest time doing it and we actually had it at my parents' house, but I had to go find a *haggadah* and read it and figure out the story again on my own so I would understand it well. We had

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a great dinner and great service, and I really enjoyed that. I think at the last Passover, I felt like this is sort of what I want my Jewish life to be like and what I want my family's Jewish life to be like – using intimate experiences where you can read a story and understand why the story was written and why we as Jews celebrate this holiday, and why it's at home and not at the synagogue – I guess that's what I want for myself and for my family."

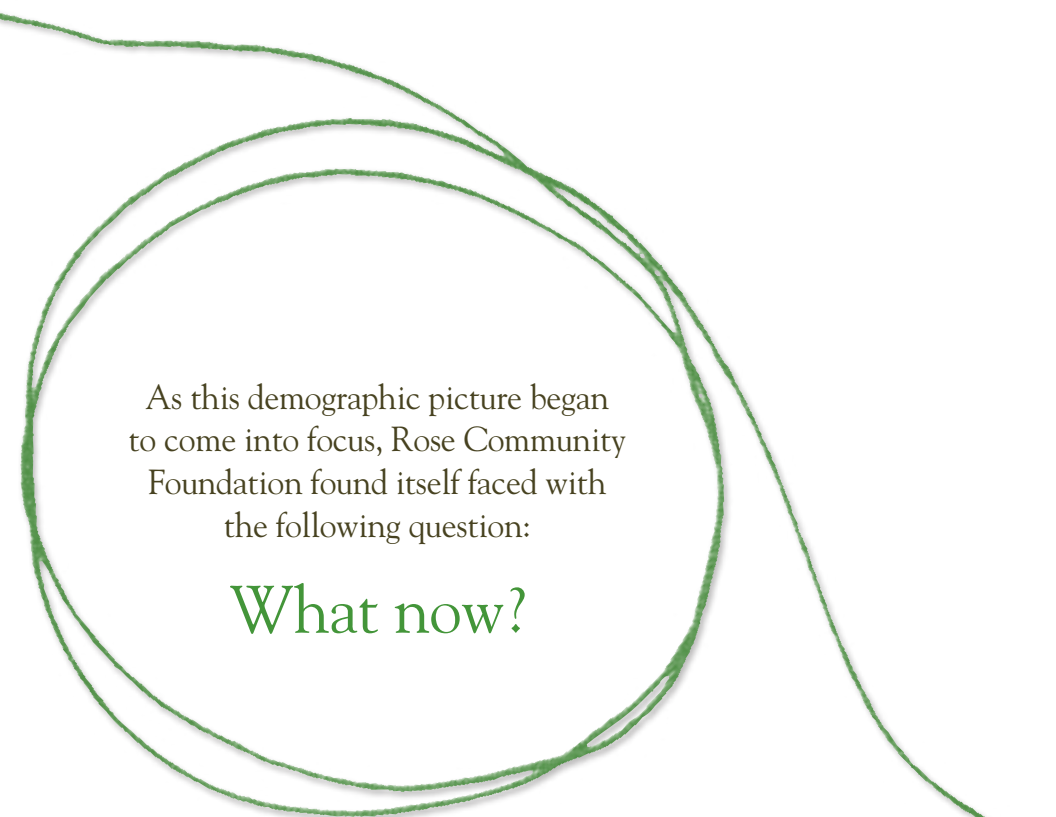
Still another recalled her decision to participate in a 100-mile run that coincided with Yom Kippur, rather than attend synagogue with her mother. "I look back on it as the best way I spent a Yom Kippur morning. You start at 4:00 in the morning on Friday. There are 10 people who are all running, and you each do three different legs of about six to eight miles each. I was on my third leg on Saturday morning, and I was running through Glenwood Canyon. There's a river that runs through it and my third leg was as the sun was rising along this river. I think it was about eight miles, and I decided that each mile I would think about a different person who was important to me in my life. I would spend that entire mile thinking about what it was that I valued about them and the relationship I had with them in the past year and how I could work on it in the coming year. I naturally think when I run, but I definitely consciously connected it to Yom Kippur. I wanted to acknowledge that this is a holiday that is important."

Stories like these are almost as prevalent as those of disaffection and dissatisfaction. These examples articulate NextGen creativity and commitment to building meaningful Jewish experiences on one's own terms, outside of community institutions but within one's own organic community of friends and family.

Thinking and acting outside of the organized Jewish community is evident not only in self-organized celebrations but in values as well. Being Jewish only among Jews runs contrary to the globally minded approach NextGen Jews take to everything from socializing to communications to popular culture. They express a broad sense of social responsibility that is rooted, often, in Jewish values but is not limited to Jewish causes. For many, this attitude is illustrated by the political and cultural organizations that they support, very few of which are Jewish. Organizations like reproductive rights groups, environmental groups or local community service groups tend to represent NextGen political views and attract their time and attention. While it may be important to NextGen Jews that an organization's goals are aligned with Jewish values, the Jewish identity of an organization holds little or no purchase on their choices. One woman, who participates in the young leadership circle of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), captured this attitude most cogently when she explained her interest in the ADL in the following way:

“What pulls me there is actually not the Jewish side of it; it's the ‘fair treatment for all people’ that I'm more attracted to. And I also think that we should stop the defamation of Jewish people. And it's a Jewish organization. And I'm meeting a lot of Jewish people through that, though I'm trying to bring in a lot of people who aren't.”

These stories represent the independent attitude of many members of the NextGen in which Jewish values resonate more deeply than Jewish institutions, and friends and family carry more influence than an abstract notion of the “community.” The attitudes, while occasionally sharply articulated, expressed the overwhelming sense that people in their 20s and 30s like being Jewish, find strength in their Jewish identities, seek meaningful Jewish experiences and often build Jewish lives on their own terms.



As this demographic picture began to come into focus, Rose Community Foundation found itself faced with the following question:

What now?

WHAT WE DID

Informed by this demographic portrait

and their cultural theory of change, Rose staff set out to practice what they learned and to change according to what they would learn along the way. Equipped with a substantial social network and the momentum gathered from the summit, the Foundation took this as an opportunity to begin making small, strategic steps that could speak to and engage Denver's NextGen Jews. These steps included a Passover seder organized by several attendees of the Estes Park Summit, a salon series, a new philanthropic initiative composed of NextGen members and funded by Rose, stand-alone cultural events and a communitywide study. Each of these projects sprung from at least one of the significant demographic findings of the Foundation's NextGen research, and all of them were guided, and in some cases organized by, the NextGen community that Friedman was working to establish.



RITUAL

In the spirit of the NextGen interest in DIY Judaism and individual ritual creation, a social justice-themed Passover seder was proposed by several summit participants. The seder was open to the entire summit community and their friends. Four summit participants collaborated to write their own *haggadah*. The popularity of the ritual was a perfect fit for this NextGen population that places high priority on assembling its own rituals among friends and family.

CULTURE

Recognizing, in consultation with summit participants, that the more intimate, DIY “religious” atmosphere of the seder or the more “intellectual” events (such as the salons described later) would not fit everyone’s needs, Rose sponsored a public performance, in conjunction with JDub records, by Tel Aviv-based DJs Soulico at a local Denver bar. This event appealed to Jewish cultural interests of people in their 20s and 30s, attracted a diverse group of people and opened a conversation between Denver and JDub, a nationally recognized record label with a strong presence on the East and West coasts but with little presence in between.

IDEAS

Further tapping into NextGen interests in culture and the positive response of interviewees to the conversational nature of the interviews themselves, Friedman launched a salon series involving discussions on contemporary Jewish issues and coordinated the efforts of a group of volunteers to bring a Limmud conference to Colorado. The salons are held in pairs, one in Denver and one in Boulder, and are often facilitated by scholars recommended by Reboot from outside the Denver/Boulder area. The series was modeled on other salons that have begun to emerge in cities across the country. The Denver/Boulder salons became a vehicle for mobilizing the community through conversation and for fostering emergent social ties among individuals in a Jewish context. “This salon that Shawna did...totally great. I like that. I don’t need people to agree with me. I find more benefit in talking with other young people who don’t.”

Similar in aim is the Limmud Colorado conference, modeled on Limmud conferences in England and New York. Limmud Colorado is an entirely volunteer-run initiative that will bring a diverse group of people together for a multi-day conference covering a wide range of Jewish topics. Although begun in conversation with Friedman and the Foundation, Limmud has become its own nonprofit organization, and the first conference is scheduled for May 2008. It has attracted a number of young Jewish leaders eager to make an impact on Jewish life in Denver/Boulder, excited at the potential for meaningful conversations about Jewish topics in a nontraditional setting, and at the opportunity for both individual engagement and community mobilization.

PHILANTHROPY

Responding more directly to the NextGen's desire to function outside traditional Jewish institutions, and to their global sensibilities, Rose Community Foundation initiated Roots & Branches Foundation. Modeled on Rose Youth Foundation, Roots & Branches was funded initially with a two-year grant from Rose, and it attracted nearly 40 applicants, of which a third were people who had no prior exposure to the Foundation. Rose provided \$50,000 for the NextGen Roots & Branches participants to grant in the Denver/Boulder area; the 18 participants chose to take advantage of an opportunity to obtain additional matching funds by contributing over \$22,000 of their own money, increasing the available grant funds to more than \$94,000. The chance both to shape a new organization and to contribute to the community was a strong draw, as one Roots & Branches member explains:

“There were many aspects of it that interested me. I felt lost and not part of anything, and I really want some part of the Jewish culture and community, especially here, because I have just settled in Denver and I'll stay here for a long time. I feel it's my responsibility to be a part of the ground level of this. It's a brand new organization; I want to get into it and be a part of the decision making process and talk about how can we involve people more in Jewish life and what's missing.”

However, beyond providing a place to simply serve the interests of members, Roots & Branches is beginning to change the shape of the Jewish communal conversation in Denver and Boulder and beyond.

“THIS SALON THAT SHAWNA DID...TOTALLY GREAT.
I LIKE THAT.

**I DON'T NEED PEOPLE
TO AGREE WITH ME.**

**I FIND MORE BENEFIT IN TALKING WITH
OTHER YOUNG PEOPLE WHO DON'T.”**

The first Roots & Branches Request for Proposals, asking for new and innovative ideas to engage NextGen Jews, generated 44 applications for funding from organizations across the Jewish spectrum, both locally and nationally. Eight grants were awarded to individuals and organizations for dynamic programming aimed at NextGen issues in the Denver/Boulder area.

RESEARCH

Finally, in an attempt to bridge the gap between established Jewish institutions in Denver/Boulder, while continuing the process of learning and reflecting begun by the NextGen Initiative, Rose Community Foundation partnered with the Allied Jewish Federation of Colorado to produce the *2007 Metro Denver/Boulder Jewish Community Study*. This was the first demographic study of the area in 10 years and included a significant focus on NextGen issues. Rose wanted Jews in their 20s and 30s to be not only the subject of the study, but to be actively involved in it as well. When a task force was created to work with results, Rose populated it to include a significant number of people from Friedman's network. The task force helped examine the data and provided critical input into its analysis and presentation. Inviting NextGen members to participate in the production of the study itself was one way that the Foundation sought to actively collaborate, not simply include or "reach out to" individuals.

Rose Community Foundation, while the instigator of these change efforts, never assumed the role of leader or director of how they ought to look. At every step of each process, the Foundation adjusted to new information, abandoned ideas that did not resonate with its audience and directed energy toward discrete projects. Each of these efforts, like the network that Friedman fostered, grew out of conversations. Both the conversations and the efforts themselves continue to evolve, sometimes changing substantively even as things are in process.



THREE

RECOMMENDATIONS To Jewish Communal Organizations and Funders

The recommendations presented here are primarily methodological rather than programmatic. To that end, these recommendations are organized according to the two most active sources of intervention and activity: funders and Jewish communal professionals. These are not specific recommendations for action, but rather suggestions as to how organizations interested in cultivating relationships with Jews in their 20s and 30s might conceive their work.

Approaching change culturally means thinking not in terms of programs, but relationships. That means that success is not measured in memberships but in community mobilization. Reflecting on local and national trends, and in conversation with some of the leading research on NextGen Jewish issues, Rose Community Foundation offers the following considerations for funders and Jewish communal professionals in guiding their work with NextGen Jews.

Jewish Communal Organizations:

- **Legwork.** Relationships are built one-by-one through face-to-face interactions, requiring time and resources and running counter to all of the social networking technologies like Facebook. But this low-tech approach is the only way to both make contact with individuals on the margins and to

engage them in substantive conversations about their interests, concerns and needs. Recognizing that these NextGen Jews are the experts on their generation's Jewish identities, and treating them as such, allows Jewish organizations to establish meaningful relationships with them. In order to build these relationships, it must be noted that approaching NextGen behaviors as a "problem" is the "problem." Intermarriage, disaffiliation and other trends are demographic realities. Calling these trends, or the people those statistics represent, "problems" will not encourage them to participate in Jewish life; communicating the meaning and substance of an institution may give NextGen members positive reasons to become involved.

- **Network.** Through legwork, Jewish professionals and organizations create a web of relationships, often from the ground up. Given the power of interpersonal connections for NextGen members, this web is the foundation for building and mobilizing community. People trust their friends more than they trust websites, flyers or advertisements, and the power of these relationships cannot be underestimated (Rosen, 2002). The onus is on the organizations to turn the individual relationships they have fostered into a network of people – a community that can be mobilized.

APPROACHING NEXTGEN BEHAVIORS
AS A "PROBLEM" IS THE PROBLEM.

- **Teamwork.** Working with this population does not mean throwing the gates open or turning direction over completely to volunteers, but first connecting people and ideas and then nurturing the connections that emerge. The idea for Roots & Branches was suggested by Friedman, not by the NextGen participants, but it emerged from the common interest in philanthropy that Friedman discovered among the NextGen interviewees. Similarly, when summit participants suggested a Passover seder, Friedman was able to set up and support a committee so it could succeed. Teamwork, in this context means fostering relationships toward particular goals, but with two important caveats:

1. Teams are organized to be temporary and the people involved in one activity may not be interested in others.
2. Professionals play a vital role in coordinating, organizing and inviting people to become involved.

Funders:

- **Framework.** The frames around Jewish life in America are shifting. The bulk of the respondents to this study expressed a love of family that was congruent with a wide embrace of diversity. They expressed strong Jewish identities and little attachment to Jewish institutions. These are new arrangements of Jewish values that often challenge the received wisdom of previous generations. But in order to address these changes, we have to cultivate new frames of understanding and engagement.

- **Patchwork.** Rather than looking for a single solution, or a single problem, for that matter, funders have the opportunity to foster Jewish diversity. The Jewish community is not cut from one cloth, but its patchwork nature contributes to not just its aesthetic, but its function. For NextGen members, with their global awareness and sensibilities, this diversity is essential.
- **Artwork.** Jewish life is not a science. Measurement and evaluation are not going to be immediately available and perhaps not even readily apparent. “Success” does not necessarily mean new memberships or greater contributions or news stories. Rather, this is part of a process of building relationships and mobilizing community, and both projects require time and investment.

CONCLUSION

Rose Community Foundation approached its target demographic with a purpose, but without a discrete end in mind. This allowed for a respect of local culture, while also enabling the Foundation to engage in cultural change and community mobilization. This work has stimulated the creation and growth of a social network that extends far beyond the mainstream Jewish world of Denver/Boulder, with implications for creative approaches to the engagement of NextGen Jews on a national scale.

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Rose Community Foundation was established in 1995 to enhance the quality of life of the Greater Denver community through its leadership, resources, traditions and values. The Foundation concentrates its resources in five key program areas: Aging, Child and Family Development, Education, Health and Jewish Life. rcfdenver.org

The Jewish Life program area supports efforts to create and sustain a vibrant Jewish community. The Foundation funds new ideas that connect Jews to Jewish life and to each other, promoting partnerships and addressing emerging needs, while also strengthening institutions so that they can respond to change. The four highest priorities in Jewish Life are outreach to unconnected Jews, experiences that promote Jewish growth, leadership development and organizational development. The Foundation is also dedicated to building bridges within the Jewish community. The Next Generation Initiative, a program of Jewish Life, has worked to engage and empower Jews in their 20s and 30s.





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