

Judaism 2030: Visions of a Jewish Tomorrow

By Jay Michaelson

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This past week, the Jewish Outreach Institute hosted a conference entitled “Judaism 2030: A Working Conference for a Vibrant Jewish Future and the Steps Necessary to Get Us There.” For this New Jewish Culture activist – now not so new, as the phenomenon has been with us for a decade or so – the conference was deeply heartening: a lot of what a generation of Jewish innovators have speculated, ranted, and plotted about for years is now on the agenda of mainstream synagogues and Jewish institutions. I took time out from the conference to talk with participants from a variety of institutional backgrounds about their visions of a “vibrant Jewish future.” Not coincidentally, most of the folks I spoke with are my friends and peers – fellow former-dreamers now working at mainstream or alternative Jewish organizations, beginning with Eva Stern, one of the organizers of the conference. Here is what they had to say.

Eva Stern Senior Director of Training, Jewish Outreach Institute New York, NY

This really is an opportunity to bring together professionals and volunteer leaders across denominational lines, across institutional lines, from all over North America: federations, synagogues, independent organizations, grass-roots organizations, and so on, to look at four central themes in terms of planning for our Jewish future: spirituality, belonging, globalism, and peoplehood. For example, in terms of spirituality: how do people find meaning in their lives, what's the role of spirituality? What does spirituality look like? What does it look like in the future, and what are the different roles of the institutions that exist today? What do those organizations and institutions have to do in order to change to meet the growing needs of our constituents today? These were the questions we were looking at so we designed a conference that would explore these four themes.

We also wanted ask the questions in order to bring the visions that are presented into reality. How do we first identify the needs of individuals, communities, organizations, etc.? How do we really step back and look at what we're doing now and what we'll be doing in the future to meet both the present needs and to be ready to meet future needs? What kinds of policy changes do we have to make, what kinds of cultural changes must we make in order, for example, to embrace the increasingly fluid nature of identity in the future? What kinds of programmatic shifts must we make, and how do our institutional agendas need to change? Our goal is really to bring people from all of these different kinds of institutions to have this conversation about the future. Because it's really not taking place in this kind of context, and we want to really outline some of those steps so we can work to make these ideas and these visions—the viable ones—into reality.

Adam Segulah Sher Program Manager, Isabella Freedman Retreat Center Falls Village, CT
Judaism has to be involved in doing real things that actually address the existential threats to humanity and the planet. If we don't, it's going to be totally irrelevant. Judaism can be employed as a tool in the world's toolbox of wisdom traditions to bring to bear on issues like global hunger and poverty and human rights and environmental rights, and if we don't do that, there's not going to be anybody around to be Jewish anyway.

The focus of this conference specifically has been about how to be more inclusive, which is really important, because of course diversity is strength. The idea that people are going to come together around ideologically similar groups is the reason why society is so splintered already and everyone just wants to hang out with people who agree with them. This is both boring and counterproductive. Real creativity comes from diversity and we have to actually make that a priority. We're actually all in the same boat—it's called the Planet Earth. It revolves around the Sun.

Olivier Ben Haim Rabbi, Bet Alef Meditative Synagogue Seattle, WA

I think the vision for Judaism 2030 is: how do we, as synagogues and small communities around the country, manage to remain relevant to the lives of our constituents while they live in a global world? How can we remain this place, this community's oasis, this place of gathering where people can find refuge, or can find a place to center themselves, to spiritually renew themselves, when their outer life is set on the internet or traveling globally in a way that might be a little bit more dysfunctional? So how can people find more functionality, more community, interconnectedness in community? I think we will succeed if we manage to keep Judaism relevant to their lifestyles, to their ideas, to their

levels of consciousness, and providing them with meaningful spirituality while they're living socially on a global scale.

Adam Gaynor Executive Director, The Curriculum Initiative New York, NY

I'm not much of a futurist. My present concern is that Jewish community—and certainly Jewish education—has been in a totally isolationist paradigm for a long time. It's about doing Jewish only with Jews and only thinking about internal communal issues. My students are not interested in that and neither am I, so I think that it's time that we apply a multicultural, deeply thoughtful method for how we educate as a community and for our engagement with the broader world. So I'm more of a Presentist in thinking about what's going on now, let's analyze it, let's critique it, and then figure out where to go.

Melinda Zalma Rabbi, Congregation Beth Mordecai Perth Amboy, NJ

I think we just have to stop making assumptions. I think we're going to get to a point with technology where we're going to say okay, we need human contact also. So I don't think that's going to shift so much. But I think it's a matter of breaking apart our assumptions of who the Jewish community is and has been, because our assumptions are based on 56-year-old models. How we get to 2030 is by continually breaking our assumptions.

Edmund Case Executive Director, InterfaithFamily.com Boston, MA

The liberal Jewish community needs to really embrace interfaith families or else I don't know if it'll be around in 2030. And I think what's needed to do that is explicit inclusive messages and programming. There are some signs that it's happening, but it's not happening fast enough. A "culture of invitation"—that's a phrase I learned yesterday. It's great to make resources available, but people really need to be invited by other people.

Daniel Sieradski Jewish New Media Activist and Director of Digital Strategy, Repair The World Brooklyn, NY

Well, the transhumanistic future is actually kind of a terrifying dystopia, isn't it? The rate at which technology is accelerating is so rapid right now that we can't possibly keep up with it, let alone spend time evaluating it ethically for the impact it's going to have on us as a society and on us as Jewish people. By the time we figure out that there's something going on it'll already be too late – we'll already be chipped, right? So I think the future is actually kind of terrifying in a certain respect because of the immense power that we're going to be giving to others to play with our neurocircuitry. The power that might give them over us as physical people is a terrifying prospect for people who have a historical awareness of what happens when you let your government treat you like a number.

There are other concerns as well. What happens to Jewish content when I can live within a multi-massive player online game? What happens to Jewish continuity when I can have any kind of sex I want in an imaginary universe in my own brain—why would I ever go out and, you know, have kids with somebody?

There are all sorts of really intense things coming down the pike that we haven't begun to grapple with as a community. We're not even looking at it. This stuff is already present technologically—it's

already here, and it's just waiting to come to market. What that spells for the Jewish future is actually frightening in some respects, but also promising in other respects. For example, right now, we have this physical land of Israel and we have this messianic belief system around bringing the Temple back and reinstituting our ritual sacrifice culture. In a virtual world, we can all imagine ourselves to be in Zion in a redeemed world, we can kill all the cows we want, we can build any Temple we want, we don't have to actually physically slaughter anything, we don't have to knock down the Dome of the Rock, we don't have to occupy the Palestinian territories. We can have the vision of the redeemed world shared among us as a consensus hallucination in virtual reality. Now, in some respects that's amazing, but also, you know, what happens when you remove the actual physicality from it? If you're experiencing it as neurochemistry in your own brain it's as physical as it can be but at the same time it's not real. Does that matter, will that matter? And if we're all plugged in and jacked into the system, is it just that the yobots will be taking care of our bodies? Who's looking after us, who's minding the store?

I actually think that there's going to be a confrontation between the ultra-Orthodox and the rest of Judaism. I think the modern Orthodox and everyone to the left of them will get chipped and the ultra-Orthodox will institute some chumra to make it treif and nobody in that community will wind up getting chipped and they'll be standing on the outside of the rest of society, less like the Amish and more like the Luddites, attacking it from the outside, isolating themselves and endangering themselves for going against the grain, while at the same time making perfectly legitimate and valid ethical critiques sourced in Jewish texts and Jewish values to stand up against the threats and dangers posed by this transition to transhumanism.