

# Mixed Multitudes



## Out of Isolation

By [Adam Gaynor](#) | July 2nd, 2009 2:01 PM

I was thrilled to see Benjamin Greene's thoughtful article in PresentTense Magazine (["Outside the Bubble: Integration in Education."](#) Issue 8, 2009) in which he discusses one of the unfortunate realities of contemporary American Jewish education: "Most Jewish youth programs in the United States today place participants in carefully constructed and exclusively Jewish environments." Given that most Jewish teens attend multicultural high schools and have diverse groups of friends, this approach flies in the face of everything we know about adolescent psychology (did *you* want to be isolated from *your* peers when you were a teen?!?!). Yet somehow, we think that isolation is the best approach for this generation of Jewish teens.

In contrast, organizations like [The Curriculum Initiative \(TCI\)](#) strive to meet teens where they are—in their schools—and help them to use Jewish wisdom and culture to navigate and find meaning in their multicultural world. But meeting students where they are is more than a reference to location; it also implies meeting them where they are intellectually, cognitively, socially, and emotionally. Therefore, we partner with the people they know and trust most intimately including their teachers, diversity directors, service-learning coordinators, school counselors, deans, chaplains, and non-Jewish friends. Thus, when a Jewish student club at a TCI-partner school recently held a "liberation Seder" in partnership with the gay-straight alliance club, the students applied meaning from the ancient Passover narrative and rituals to the very contemporary experiences of their gay peers (lest we think that all Jews are heterosexual, note that some of the students were members of both clubs).

And what have we found? Attendance in our programs has risen, and the number of Jewish teens in our programs who are *not* involved in youth groups, synagogues, Jewish camps, and other Jewish institutions has also grown. In interviews and focus groups, students report that our open approach to Jewish learning and our student-centered perspective create a comfortable space in which they can wrestle with questions of identity.

The reality is that today's teens are fully integrated into their multicultural communities and will continue to live in such communities into adulthood; yet Jewish educators at best have buried our heads in the sand and at worst, view this reality as a threat, rather than an opportunity. We have convinced ourselves that the purpose of Jewish education is to stave off assimilation and intermarriage, but fear is never a great motivating factor in education. Furthermore, we have decided that the way to prevent assimilation and intermarriage is to encourage young Jews to adopt particular Jewish behaviors. We want them to host Shabbat dinners, advocate for Israel, marry a Jewish partner, and become federation donors. Are these really meaningful ends?

The kind of end I believe in is when one of my students says to me that she now celebrates Shabbat because it provides for her a meaningful framework in which to rest and reflect together with friends and loved-ones. In short, she is telling me that the purpose of Judaism is to live a more meaningful life. That is an end that speaks to me. Jewish education should be about creating meaning that helps us to live more fulfilling lives. If it doesn't, then what is the point?

*Guest blogger Adam Gaynor is the Executive Director of [The Curriculum Initiative](#).*