

## Jewbilee 2006: It's All A Juggling Act

A low din buzzed through the cavernous Wigglesworth Hall at Milton Academy. Cozy pairs of students scattered across the floor, musing over an ancient text.

The short text-study from *Pirkei Avot*, *The Ethics of the Fathers*, a Jewish book, weighed the values of study and of action, and jumpstarted the bonding that would be the hallmark of Jewbilee 2006. Held February 4th-5th in Milton, MA, TCI's signature conference drew 70 teens from 23 schools in seven states, record numbers on all fronts.

Jewbilee's theme was juggling Jewish identity, touching on the "balancing act" Jewish students at independent high schools often negotiate in order to integrate their "Jewishness" with the other parts of their lives.

Jewbilee engaged students in hands-on learning and social activities, all infused with content to deepen student connections to their Jewish identities.

### Learning and Fun Abound

Saturday's programs centered around creating spiritual and social bonds between the students. Team-building activities challenged students to establish trust among one another, and a melodic *havdallah* service, led by Lenox Memorial High School student, Adam Ross, brought the group closer through traditional songs and a soothing *nigun* (wordless melody).

Saturday night, "Big Wig" (Wigglesworth Hall) was transformed into an Arab-style tent, setting the stage for The Sultana Ensemble, an ecumenical and multicultural band that got students dancing.

Sunday was a day of experiential learning, headed off by a keynote address from Cara Kahn Nussbaum of MTV's *The Real World*. Nussbaum brought to light her experience as a television personality and her realizations about the complexity of identity. She described her efforts to combat her narrow characterization as the "Jewish woman," a role cut for her by the show's directors.

"I felt like I had to represent the Jewish people [on the show], and Jewish women specifically," said Nussbaum. It was a lot of pressure, but I am very proud of my identity as a Jew," Nussbaum said.

Cara's speech propelled the students into the afternoon workshops — intensive presentations and discussions on student-driven topics and issues. Students chose among interactive sessions that addressed Israel's complexity as a state, independent journalism and alternative media; the construction and "faces" of American Jewish identity, and Jewish LGBTQ identity.

Workshop and organizational presenters included BBYO, New Voices, Jewish Women's Archive, Keshet, The Jewish Museum, the Teen JCC of Greater

Boston, and The Berkshire Institute for Music and Arts.

Jewbilee closed with a performance by Manginah, Brandeis University's Jewish student a capella group, who shared their insights about Jewish life at college.

### **Looking to the Present and Future**

Jewbilee nurtured meaningful connections among students, teachers, and TCI staff. And, it generated thoughts and ideas for student involvement in Jewish life at school and in their personal lives.

Gil Schpero, a junior at Cheshire Academy in Connecticut, said Jewbilee got him thinking about his future, especially at college.

"Last year, when I was looking at colleges, I would have never thought that the Jewish population would be important; in fact, I didn't even care,"

said Schpero. "But now, I think that it's one of the most important factors when I apply to college," he added.

"I'm really looking forward to another interschool event," said Adam Chetrit, a senior at Kew Forest School in Forest Hills, New York. "I would really like to have students at my house for a Shabbat dinner and to meet with other Jewish student club leaders from New York and New England."

Every student left Jewbilee with something more than they had come with, whether it was a plan for their school, college, or just good feelings about being Jewish, the friends they made, the fun they had.

Zach Boroson of Cheshire Academy left feeling infused with Jewish inspiration.

"I left Jewbilee feeling more Jewish," Boroson said.