

## The future for North American Jewry seems a little less bleak now

Will Facebook and Twitter replace temples and schools? JewishFutures conference examined the digital turf of the future "where no Jew has gone before."

By Chemi Shalev | 14:24 05.06.12 | 0

Tweet 10

First, audience members at each table were asked to choose one recommendation on how to improve Jewish communities. Then, each table was told to tweet their recommendation. Within seconds, these tweets started to appear on large video screens, for all to see. Finally, a "word cloud" was formed, showing the various ingredients of the participants' collective prescription for a better Jewish life. And then the appreciative crowd burst out in spontaneous cheer and delighted applause at the delightful display of digital pyrotechnics.

It was an apt, state-of-the-art finale for the JewishFutures 2012 Conference in New York that promised to "bring together visionary thinkers, passionate individuals, and inspiring presentations in a conference designed to shift the horizon of our thinking in Jewish education." In the admittedly unprofessional eyes and ears of this writer, at least, the conference more than lived up to its hype.

Jointly organized by JESNA – the Jewish Education Service for North America and the New York-based JEP – the Jewish Education Project - the conference, held for the third year running, brought together more than 400 teachers, principals, educators, funders and academics who crowded into Lehrer Hall in Columbia University on Manhattan's Upper West Side.

The audience, mostly under 40 and about 50% observant, by the look of things, listened in rapt silence to top-notch, TED-style presentations, gleefully collaborated with the often-contrived interactions concocted by the organizers and went home with new contacts and acquaintances as well as content smiles on their faces. This was, by no means, a dreary and dull conference with presentations by tired old teachers.

The conference focused on the evolving concept of Jewish community and of Jewish learning in an era when Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and other social media are rapidly supplementing, if not completely replacing traditional structures of the community and of the classroom. "Judaism is thriving," said one of the main speakers, Allison Fine, a social media expert, "it's the institutions that are struggling."

According to statistics compiled by the Avi Chai foundation, there are about 220,000 students in Jewish day schools throughout the United States, most of them Orthodox, but the conference's main focus is on so-called "supplementary schools" – after hours, Sunday schools and other frameworks – in which another 230,000 are enrolled, and the overwhelming majority of these are either Reform, Conservative or community centered. And there are indications of a steady decline in participation in such supplementary schools, especially among children past Bat and Bar Mitzvah age.

"Many of the complaints about the state of Jewish education are merited," concedes JESNA President and CEO Donald Sylvan, a former professor of political science and Middle East studies at Ohio State University. "But we don't want to do what we used to do. What we aim to present is the innovative and transformative processes that are occurring in Jewish education – to show off the neat stuff."

And neat stuff they showed, indeed, from riveting presentations on "Tweeting at the Campfire" by well-known feminist writer and social-media expert Courtney Martin (who delighted the crowd with two sensational factoids – that 20% of all daily Google searches are completely new and that of the world's six billion inhabitants, 4.2 billion have toothbrushes but 4.8 billion have cellphones); Rabbi Laura Baum, who streams weekly Shabbat services through the Internet on her innovative website OurJewishCommunity.org; the abovementioned Allison Fine, author of Momentum: Igniting Social Change in the Connected Age who gave social media tips gleaned from her experience as president of Temple Abraham in Tarrytown, New York; Morlie Levin, CEO of Birthright Israel – Next, who spoke of "people-centered education" that Taglit-Birthright excels in; and Naomi Korb Weiss, of the Jerusalem-based Presentense who moderated the so-called IdeaSlam of Twitter recommendations described in the opening paragraph.

But the overwhelming favorite of the crowd – and deservedly so – was Shimon Waronker, a Chabadnik disciple the Lubavitcher Rebbe, whose life story truly deserves another Hollywood blockbuster portrayal of a teacher overcoming the odds in a tough and violent school, a la Stand and Deliver with Edward James Olmos or Lean on Me with Morgan Freeman.

A former Army Intelligence officer and current Harvard graduate, Waronker was placed in the US media spotlight after turning around one of the most violent schools in America – PS22 in the South Bronx – despite being a fish completely out of water with his kippa, beard, black suit and tzitzit threads hanging out from under his jacket. Two years ago, Waronker opened the New American Academy in Crown Heights where he is again introducing revolutionary teaching methods to elementary school children from underprivileged backgrounds. His school, by the way, is also known as PS 770, the same number marking the Eastern Parkway address in Brooklyn of the revered Menachem Mendel Schneerson, but whether this is by accident or divine design could not be ascertained at press time.

Showcasing the innovative aspect of the conference was the JewishFutures competition, the winners of which, Rabbi Ami Hersh and Dana Levinson of Ramah Day Camps, delighted the crowd with the "Ramah 365" smartphone application that enables maintaining personal connections and continuing Jewish activities throughout the year for participants and counselors of the well-known Ramah camp movement.

The conference, of course, was great on ideas but did not deal with some of the well-known financing obstacles that have proven to be such a challenge for Jewish start-ups, as detailed in a recent report entitled "Abundant Harvest" compiled by the Bikkurim "Jewish incubator" organization financed by the Jewish Federations of North America and the Kaminer family.

Nonetheless, if one has to judge by the earnestness and enthusiasm of the participants in the JewishFutures conference, Jewish innovation and motivation are alive and kicking, at least among those already committed to the cause.

And even though this Israeli observer tried to muster the expected dose of cynicism usually reserved for such gatherings of committed Jewish do-gooders, it didn't materialize this time. The future, in fact, seemed a little less bleak after the conference, especially for North American Jewry. And as an Israeli who believes that the deterioration of education standards in Israel is a mortal danger to the country, I could not help but feel a completely different sentiment when confronted by such an impressive gathering of motivated and innovative educators and teachers: intense jealousy.

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