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The Jerusalem Report®

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COVERING ISRAEL, THE MIDDLE EAST & THE JEWISH WORLD

Ukrainian nightmare

How Russian occupation decimated Jewish life in the east of the country



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Why we need new communities

JEWISH COMMUNITIES around the world are grappling with the same challenge: how to keep millennials engaged. Just as they have disrupted all industries, they are re-imagining what it means to live in a community.

There has been a significant shift in Jewish society, as growing proportions of young adults do not identify with traditional community structures like synagogues and community centers, and often find themselves without any meaningful Jewish affiliation during their crucial “young professional” years. Communal life is a vital component to maintaining Jewish identity, and so Jewish intentional communities – whereby people congregate around a social action – have been on the rise around the world.

Post-modernism and tectonic changes in the economy have resulted in a dissolving sense of community and belongingness in the West. Previously solid social networks – like synagogues, neighborhoods and even offices – are disintegrating, and according to a recently published Harvard study, loneliness is already an epidemic, riskier to one’s health than physical inactivity, and almost as risky as smoking. The government in the United Kingdom has even established a new ministry to deal with loneliness. And no, social media doesn’t alleviate loneliness. Research shows it actually increases it. Similar to how we still don’t have a better solution to hunger than food, we still don’t have a better solution to loneliness than communities. What we do have is new technologies to produce those.

One might ask why don’t millennials just join one of the established Jewish communities and feed two birds with one grain? Less loneliness and more Jewish identity. Many argue that this is because millennials don’t care about too much other than themselves, but that can hardly be the case as data shows that almost half of millennials would move to lower-paying jobs if they offer a better sense of meaning and serve a greater purpose than themselves. There is no point in looking for anyone to blame, as circumstances have also changed, and the millennial generation is going to possess more economic power than all previous ones, combined, so it can afford more. Today, even a relatively low-paying nonprofit job enables higher quality of life than corporate jobs of the past.

I argue the more nuanced answer has four parts: (a) millennials are looking for intimate and horizontal structures, rather than mega-communities that make you feel even more lonely; (b) Jewish millennials see themselves as privileged, hence *tikkun olam* – repairing the world – is a core value of theirs; (c) many Jewish institutions are, at the very least, perceived by many millennials as not being inclusive enough, even if very subtly and almost unconsciously, and this is true across the board in all denominations; and (d) millennials simply don’t care about those denominations all that much, and feel perfectly comfortable with multi, dynamic or no formal affiliation at all.

On top of all this, the entire Jewish ecosystem was geared to support Jewish identity until people finish school, assuming they will get married soon after and circle back to the community. However,



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A Hakhel gathering: since Hakhel began five years ago, it has become the largest global incubator for Jewish intentional communities

the gap between college and settling down is no longer two to three years, not even 10, sometimes not even 15. Communities are still the solution, we just need a new version that will be more relevant and inclusive to millennials.

An Intentional Community is a small and non-hierarchical group of people who have consciously decided to live together spatially and temporally around a shared purpose. In this sense, an intentional community can serve as a framework for both individual growth, as well as give people the opportunity to work collaboratively to make the world a better place – to become the better version of ourselves, as we millennials put it nowadays.

The reason it works is because these communities respond in a relevant way to millennials’ need for a sense of belonging and meaning. If you want to attract millennials, you need to acknowledge their difference and offer them – no, sorry – create with them the appropriate complex response. Since Hakhel began five years ago, we’ve grown to become the largest global incubator for Jewish intentional communities. Today, we have 108 communities in 28 countries on six continents. They all have different themes, but they share a common goal in that they are creating the Judaism of the future, the one where millennials feel creative and empowered. ■

Rabbi Aharon Ariel Lavi is founder and general director of Hakhel, the first and largest global incubator for Jewish intentional communities. Hakhel operates in partnership with Israel’s Ministry of Diaspora Affairs, which works to strengthen Jewish life in the Diaspora and connection to Israel. For more information, visit: <https://hazon.org/hakhel/overview/>