

Jewish Agency *continued from page one*

challenging journey into Israeli society as well as its people, culture, politics, economy, land, and history.

For younger Jews, The Jewish Agency supports the following experiences worldwide:

- **Bac Bleu Blanc**, a teen Israel experience that annually brings around 1,000 Jewish teenagers to Israel from France.
- **Teen trips** for Jewish day schools in Mexico, bringing 95 percent of Mexico's Jewish teenage population to Israel by the time they graduate from high school.
- **Encounter**, a 10-day educational trip to Israel for Jewish day school students from South Africa.

Shlichim: A Global Perspective

Shlichim cultivate Jewish identity not just in North American communities like Akron, but across the globe.

For instance, throughout the former Soviet Union (FSU), professionals devoted to the needs of Russian-speaking Jewry run a continuum of programs for all ages that reach tens of thousands of Jews in the FSU on an annual basis.

Each year, FSU summer, winter, and seasonal camps enable 8,000 young Russian-speaking Jews — ranging in age from 7 to young adulthood — to enjoy transformative Jewish learning experiences.

Since 2014, “specialty camps” in this region have taught participants marketable career skills while also helping them explore their Jewish heritage, such as a media and communications camp. Also launched in 2014, day camps aimed at providing dynamic Jewish experiences to children who have never attended sleep-away camp.



The Jewish Agency's Project TEN volunteers assist in a health campaign in Pluma Hidalgo, Oaxaca, Mexico. Credit: The Jewish Agency for Israel.

Careful, You May Already Be Engaged

TODD POLIKOFF

CEO OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY BOARD OF AKRON

I was very active in the B'nai B'rith Youth Organization (BBYO) while in high school. My involvement was not intentional and would not have happened if my parents didn't make it a priority. Regardless of my vehement protests, my mother dropped me off at a seemingly random home with a few dollars for dinner. She purposefully neglected to tell me that the event was a sleepover. By the next morning I was elected “Sergeant at Arms,” most likely because I was the biggest guy in the room. I eventually became a BBYO regional officer, attended a summer program, and even (unsuccessfully) ran for Grand Aleph Godol (international president). Due mostly to family financial and time constraints, BBYO was the extent of my Jewish organization, agency, or synagogue involvement.

Because my family was not involved in any other capacity, many at the time (the late '80s) who considered us to be unaffiliated — and we weren't the only ones. Organizations exhausted human and financial capital in an effort to find Jews, like my family, who were undiscovered or, even worse, hiding in an effort to avoid paying dues.

In the past several years, Jewish semantics has shifted from using the term “affiliated” to “engaged” to indicate participation in the community. Regardless of which word is used, there remains a lingering problem with both: their definitions. I think we need to be explicit about how we define affiliated or engaged and avoid using them as one-word mission statements for an initiative or committee. When applying the Socratic Method to define these terms, I find that our initiatives either don't match the definition or that the population that we thought fit in the engaged/affiliated category is not as large as we thought (or even exists at all). To take this one step further, when we widen the scope of “engaged,” organizations may find that they are wasting capital to capture community members that they already have in their database.

Take PJ Library as an example. To enroll in it, families must take the initiative to sign up to receive a Jewish book for their children from the Jewish community, in their home, every month. Very often, PJ Library registration may be the only connection that these families have to the community. It is one of the few times in which unknown members of our community raise their hands, often unsolicited, and say “*Heneni* – Here I am.”

This begs the question of what engagement means. If a family signs up to receive at least one Jewish storybook for the next eight years of their child's life, are they engaged? Are they participating in the community more or less than someone who pays synagogue dues but only goes to services three times per year or someone who joins the JCC but only uses the gym? I would argue that PJ Library registration easily passes the bar to consider that family engaged. The extent to which they become further engaged is based on how the relationship is cultivated. In essence, it is on the Jewish organizations to present the value proposition (both communal and financial) for those families to join.

I think that we as a community need to spend a bit more time defining what we really mean by engaged before we apply financial or human capital toward an initiative. In the end, if we only define engagement by the payment of dues or membership, then we will miss a broad spectrum of our community. This is why the Jewish Community Board of Akron funds programs like J-Ticket, PJ Library, Rubber City Jews, BBYO, and other initiatives. All of these require some action by the participant to identify as a member of the Jewish community. That awareness, that self-identification, that act of proactively wanting to be a part of the community, that call of “*Heneni*” is a more than sufficient definition of “engaged” in my book.



Jewish Community
BOARD OF AKRON

President: DAVID MINC
CEO: TODD S. POLIKOFF

Editor & Advertising: LISA HOFMANN
330.835.0013 • editor@jewishakron.org

Circulation/Address Changes:
330.869.2424 • sgalat@jewishakron.org

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