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Creating Community

Barukh attah adonai, eloheinu, melekh ha-olam, asher kidd'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivvanu l'hadlik neir shel yom tov. The mish-mash of letters didn't feel quite right in a young Anna Goldman's mouth. Hebrew felt like chewing on an unusual food, and visiting her Jewish family on high holidays felt like stepping into a different world — a world illuminated by candlelight and song. A secret world, unseen by most. She doubted her school-friends had even heard terms like *Rosh Hashanah*, *Sukkot*, and *Shavuot*. To her, they meant seeing her cousins and sneaking sips of grape juice when her grandfather's eyes were closed during prayers. To her grandfather, it meant a chance to keep Judaism breathing. He often told her, “I'm so proud that I have so many people here who are passing on the tradition. So many people keeping it alive.” Judaism meant much more to him than to her, at the time.

Over time, her grandfather's words helped Anna come to understand how integral community is to Judaism; it served to maintain her unseen world. In her early youth, she found that sense of community within her holiday dinners with family. Without that, she may have lost touch with her religion and culture entirely. According to research by the Pew Research Center, Jews make up only 0.2% of the world's population. As Anna put it, “community is such a huge part of Judaism - I think more so than other religions, honestly, because we are so small in numbers. I think that really drives us to really remain steadfast and hold on to our values and really pass those along to our families for generations to come” (Goldman). In a post-October 7th

world, where the concept of *being* Jewish is put under question, community has never been so important to the culture. As put by Rabba Sara Hurtwitz, “This is what we do. In times of tragedy, we rally” (Silow-Carroll).

In recent months, being a Jewish teenager has felt like being trapped in the middle of a tornado - a whirlwind of confusion. It seems as though every other social media post discusses Israel or Judaism, each imposing an entirely different viewpoint. Currently, to be a Jewish teenager, is to be confused. Confused with your heritage, beliefs, and identity. Since October 7th, Jewish teens can be best described as feeling “seismic shifts in their relationship to Israel, how they form ... their way of being Jewish in a world that feels scarier, lonelier and, in some surprising ways, more Jewish than ever” (Silow-Carroll). However, Anna is no longer a teenager, and her relationship with her ethnicity has become more solidified. As such, she’s begun work with BBYO, a Jewish youth organization. Her work with BBYO involves strengthening the community of Jewish teens in the organization, emphasizing to them how this situation is an opportunity to be “more Jewish than ever.”

Anna recalls a specific incident at her job being more memorable than most. It was late October, after the massacre at Nova Music Festival in Israel, and BBYO was hosting an overnight trip. “We had a lot of parents that were really concerned about the security and safety of the teens at the camp we were staying at. Some of them came as far as physically being on the camp campus to make sure that everything was okay, even though we had a paid security guard 24 hours, making sure that everything was okay” (Goldman). The trip was aimed at fostering a sense of safety; it invited these teens to be re-welcomed into a group that understood what they were going through. Nevertheless, there was an air of unease. BBYO member, Rachel Berry, remembers feeling uncomfortable with “advertising” her Judaism. It was a night of discomfort.

Anna watched as the usual closeness and laughter that she always saw enrapture these teens was replaced with distance and fear. She had to sit them down and remind them, and herself, that community is the only thing that could get them through this. In her grandfather's words, people are what keep Judaism alive. These words gave the teens something to think about - Rachel came away from the night with acknowledgement that her "entire Jewish experience has been based on community and supporting my friends and family and being supported by that." Anna has described this quote as the definition of BBYO's importance.

Anna didn't always value her Jewish identity - as mentioned earlier, high holidays with her grandparents were really the only times she came into contact with it. That is, until high school. Her career choice was not the beginning of her relationship with BBYO, rather the culmination of years spent as a member of the organization. In high school, she spent all weekend, every weekend with BBYO. It had her "hooked" (Goldman). Eventually she graduated high school, and then she graduated college. College left her spending hours on LinkedIn, searching for a job that was the perfect fit for her. Then, by some chance, a job opening from BBYO popped up. She took the opportunity to be reinvited to that community without a blink.

Though Anna's early detachment from her cultural identity was less due to fear of antisemitism and more to due lack of a Jewish community, the teens she works with now are dealing with the former. When Anna was in BBYO as a teenager, it inspired her Judaism. Now, it is desperately working to resuscitate Judaism for its members. Teenagers, now, are forced to confront their Jewish identity everywhere they turn, whether it be home, school, or online. BBYO members like Rachel have come to Anna for advice about classmates they've seen "posting anti-Semitic stuff" (Berry). It's become a new form of social rejection - or rather, a revitalized one. Anna acknowledges that the "toxic battleground in the war of ideas" that social

media has become (Silow-Carroll) may not be as directly as impactful to her, but it remains devastating. “It's just - it's really disheartening and a little frustrating and sad that these things are happening to, essentially, children by children. That's the worst part” (Goldman). We've seen how quickly antisemitism has spread before the internet, but now that we have it “...if nothing is done to confront the rise in antisemitism, it will only get worse” (Susswein, Mitch). The need for Jewish community and solace has never been more eminent.

Taking all of these new waves and variations of antisemitism into account, Anna is forced to reflect upon what lies ahead for her with BBYO. She imagines that there are plenty of Jewish teens out there who lack the community they deserve; who are frightened in their own identity. “Jewish students, and the Jewish community at large, often feel that their only allies are themselves” (Veksler, Tessa). As she moves forward with BBYO, Anna wants to ensure that Jews, everywhere, have access to such an environment. A place that provides commonality, safety, and empowerment. Through her own experiences and those she's witnessed, BBYO creates a community of people “who are still so excited to be Jewish publicly and openly” (Goldman). Communities like that are what keep Judaism alive and breathing.

Anna holds immense value in the work she does, and the work she sees the teens of BBYO doing. “It's just so encouraging seeing these kids be so strong even when I would not expect them to be and to really be champions in their community for a good cause, because Jews ain't going anywhere.”

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