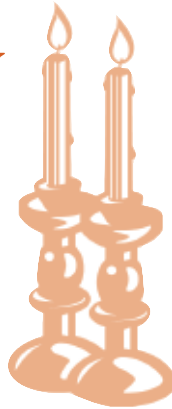


TRANSFORMING GENERATIONS X AND Y AND DISCOVERING MY PATH TO THE RABBINATE

Nicole Roberts, C '12



Nicole Roberts, L'12, (at left) and Rachel Grant Meyer, N'12, making bricks at Kibbutz Lotan during their Year-In-Israel.

Leading the Jacob Project at Temple Micah in Nashville, TN, was one of the experiences that made me realize I wanted to be a rabbi. It offered an opportunity for people in their 20s and 30s to experience the cycle of one Jewish year together, through alternating discussions and celebrations that were entirely lay-led. It was a year spent wrestling with how to make Judaism our own, recognizing that what was meaningful to earlier generations might differ from what's meaningful to us today.

This project was inspired by the story of Jacob in the *Torah*, who one night finds himself wrestling with an ambiguous creature and emerges changed by his experience. He is given a new name, Israel, and goes on to father the 'children of Israel,' the Jewish people. Our hope was that in the end we would emerge – like Jacob – changed by our experience, transformed into a community that enjoys “living Jewish,” and capable of passing on what we've discovered to future generations.

We met twice a month for a discussion (learning, exploring, planning) and for a celebration (doing, making, holidays). The discussions were held each *Rosh Hodesh* and explored an aspect of Judaism relevant to the lives of people in their 20s and 30s, or an upcoming holiday's meaning in our lives, or planning how to celebrate the upcoming holiday together in a traditional or creative way that would have meaning to this age group. The celebration of holidays, which

grew out of these discussions, were held outdoors when possible – from starting the year with *Rosh Hodesh* under the stars and ending the year with a *Shavuot* sunrise hike at the lake.

When we weren't planning holiday events, we discussed the weekly *Torah* portion, debated Reform Principles, learned about our congregation's history, and volunteered in the community.

We had a *Shabbat* dinner and a *Havdalah* gathering in participants' homes. The cost of participation was one can of food for the food bank per gathering and an occasional potluck meal. On *Simchat Torah* we began reading *Torah* together, and the synagogue gave each participant a *Tanakh* (Bible). Occasionally, participants were emailed a short text to read before meeting for discussion.

The success of these lay-led programs was due to the mixture of discussions and celebrations in diverse settings, offering opportunities to both learn and experience. Articles were written about each discussion so that those who missed a gathering didn't feel left out. The unthreatening environment fostered honest discussions, in which participants learned from each other and enjoyed sharing what they found most meaningful about Jewish living. Those considering conversion felt comfortable coming to learn and to experience Judaism for the first time and began to feel more like a part of our congregation. Participants took ownership of different aspects of the Project, by

offering their web-design services, hosting gatherings at their homes, leading discussions, organizing community service activities, playing guitar for our *Havdalah* services, and teaching the *Birkat HaMazon*, which was new to many in the Project.

Participants learned about our congregation's history and their role in it. They learned how to better define Reform Judaism in affirmative terms. Our discussions were lively and our celebrations were festive and educational. The Project provided an opportunity for a group of people who were eager to engage in Judaism to do so. We had a diverse group of participants – couples (Jewish and interfaith), singles (Jewish, non-Jewish), converting, gay, parents, twenty-somethings, thirty-somethings – who now serve on the congregation's board, teach religious school, and no longer feel estranged when they attend services. Judaism has become integral to their lives, and they have formed lasting friendships. And in the process, I found my own path to rabbinical school at HUC-JIR. ■

The Jacob Project received the Union for Reform Judaism's Belin Outreach and Membership Award for actively welcoming and integrating those new to Judaism within the synagogue setting.
www.JacobProject.org