

Kenissa Summary Report and Survey: What We Did, What We Learned

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[Kenissa: Communities of Meaning Network](#) emerged from the publication of *Jewish Megatrends: Charting the Course of the American Jewish Future* in 2013. My lead essay in the book argued that, while legacy Jewish organizations are on the decline and, it seems, American Jewish life is deteriorating, there is a countervailing process on the Jewish landscape of emergent communities and organizations that represent the seeds of an American Jewish renaissance. I invited thirteen communal professionals, each one a leader in a specific sector of American Jewish life, to write an essay for the book, to share their thoughts about how their respective sector was in the midst of transition. The closing chapter integrated the various perspectives and suggested some future directions for the American Jewish community.

The book elicited much interest and comment from major stakeholders in the American Jewish community. Based on that interest, in 2015 we secured funding from The William Davidson Foundation to create a national initiative that was designed to find, convene, and build capacity with the “creatives” — individuals who were driving the phenomenon described in *Jewish Megatrends*. These creatives were building new organizations and communities across a range of sectors including: social justice; spiritual practice; independent *minyanim*; Jewish learning groups; and eco-sustainability.

When we started the project, we didn’t have a very good handle on how large this network of creatives might be. We were primarily interested in the founders or leaders of organizations created since the year 2000 that represented innovative, new models of Jewish life and community. Many of the organizations were still in a “start-up” phase although, over the nine years of the project, we included a handful of organizations that started prior to 2000 and were more firmly established in terms of staffing and sustainability. Five organizational co-sponsors, all hubs for the sectors that we were most interested in exploring, were critical to our ability to map the phenomenon. Those organizational co-sponsors were: Hazon (environment and sustainability); Bend the Arc and then JOIN for Justice (social justice); the Institute for Jewish Spirituality (spiritual practice); Hadar (Jewish learning and independent *minyanim*); and UpStart (a national hub for Jewish innovation and social entrepreneurship).

Mapping the Field

The mapping project proved surprising and enlightening. Our organizational co-sponsors gave us a head-start, each being able to identify a dozen or more organizations that they were aware of that fit our criteria. As we started to sponsor national convenings which were “by invitation only”, we used a commitment to co-creation as our working principle. Each invitation to a founder included the lead essay from *Jewish Megatrends* and a request to tell us: “What do you agree with? What do you disagree with? What did we miss?” The responses were fascinating. They formed the basis for the conversations at our nine national gatherings from 2016-2020 (two per year). We also edited the responses and published them monthly on a [Kenissa blog](#) which was distributed to the entire network.

The response rate to our invitations to attend the *Kenissa* national convenings was extremely high. It soon became clear why. Most of our participants (who we called, “creatives”) felt a keen

sense of isolation in their work. To amplify the significance of those we invited, our invitation telegraphed that we were building a North American network of creatives. We set out to advocate for the creatives, both as individual entrepreneurs and as an emerging field that, we believed, would contribute to the long-term strength and viability of the Jewish community.

Many of the organizations that became part of the *Kenissa* Network worked under the radar of the organized Jewish community but they were actually more successful at attracting the Next Gen Jews than were many legacy organizations with much larger budgets. Yet the founders of these organizations struggled to find the resources to properly finance their operations and many felt marginalized by the mainstream Jewish community because they tended to be culturally, religiously and politically edgy.

By the end of our nine-year project, our network had grown to 400+ organizations. About 70% of those groups attended one of our national gatherings. As the size of our network grew, it became impossible to dismiss the phenomenon as a “fad”, a term I heard used by some long-time Jewish communal professionals. These groups are very much a product of the internet DIY (do it yourself) culture and the emerging social economic patterns of the 21st century. It also became increasingly clear that these organizations were the key to engaging Next Gen Jews.

The boutique nature of most of the organizations coming into our orbit was evident from the first few national convenings of the network. Unlike legacy Jewish organizations (e.g. synagogues, JCCs, Jewish Federations) that are multi-dimensional, the start-up economy rewarded organizations (as well as businesses, though that was beyond our scope) that identified a very specific niche and target audience. That phenomenon was already identified in *Jewish Megatrends*, but the architecture of our network was fleshed out based on conversations that took place when we started convening the creatives.

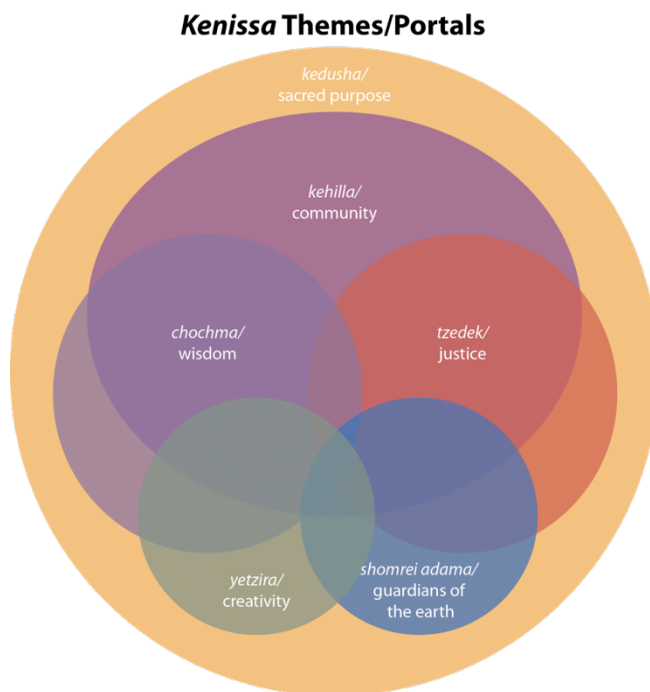
Notably, when we initially set out to identify the areas of Jewish life where most of the innovation energy resided, the creatives pointed out that we overlooked the importance of arts and culture. We added it. At our conferences, when we broke the network down into working affinity groups, we realized that though environmental sustainability and social justice were “kissing cousins”, they had distinct agendas and ways of approaching their work. We allowed each to convene separately. Similarly, independent *minyanim* and start-up synagogues that were strongly mission-driven needed distinct affinity groupings.

We eventually came up with six themes that became the organizing principle of our work. We called them “sectors” and each represented a “portal” through which many Jews were prepared to experience a facet of Jewish life and community. The sectors were:

- *Chochma*/Wisdom – engaging with the wisdom and practice of our inherited Jewish heritage;
- *Kedusha*/Sacred Purpose – helping people live lives of sacred purpose;
- *Tzedek*/Social Justice – inspiring people to work for a more just and peaceful world;
- *Yetzira*/Creativity – the human ability to imagine/invent/create ideas, science, art and culture;

- *Kehillah/Covenantal Community* – creating intentional, covenantal communities that bind people to one another and to a shared mission;
- *Shomrei Adama/Guardians of the Earth*- pursuing a lifestyle that is ecologically responsible and sustainable, including new communal living arrangements.

When we identified an organization that we wanted to invite into the network, we asked them to self-identify according to these six sectors. They would identify which of the sectors were “primary” (one) and which (one or more) were “secondary”. It was soon obvious that there was overlap between the themes and we came to represent it graphically in the following way:



While our initiative launched with a somewhat clunky name (The New Paradigm Spiritual Community Initiative) we soon renamed our ourselves *Kenissa*, the Hebrew term for “entrance-way”. It was the perfect word to describe the network of Jewish communities of meaning that we were identifying and convening. For so many, these organizations and communities opened the door, or “portal,” to many Jews who were not attracted by more mainstream Jewish organizations. Our research revealed that when people began to engage with one of these Jewish communities of meaning, it often represented the first exposure that those individuals were having with Jewish life as adults.

Leveraging the Network

A significant challenge that we faced with the *Kenissa* initiative was how best to leverage our growing network. We were not offering grant money to the creatives. And while we did do some capacity building training at our national convenings, we were not set up to do it over a sustained period with all the coaching that requires. UpStart, our innovation incubator partner, was designed to do exactly that and we encouraged our creatives to access UpStart’s programs.

Kenissa's biggest value added was twofold: 1) We created a setting of mutual support in which the creatives felt seen and heard and where they met many colleagues who were facing similar challenges of creating a healthy and sustainable business model; 2) We became advocates for the phenomenon of emerging “communities of meaning” across the six thematic areas that described the work of our network. To do that required us to define the phenomenon in a way that the mainstream community could understand and value. This was easier said than done.

We found a valuable ally in Dr. Beth Cousens who, at the time, was Associate Vice President of the Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA), leading their Jewish education and engagement work. Beth understood the significance of the network we were building and felt that it was important to bring our work to the attention of senior staffers at Jewish Federations all around the country. She hosted one webinar that featured me talking about the *Kenissa* Network. The attendance was so strong and interest was so high that, a few weeks later, we did a second webinar. I was convinced that having staff from local Federations experience a *Kenissa* gathering would advance our cause in significant ways. After all, the Federations had financial resources and organizational expertise, both of which would benefit the creatives. Conversely, *Kenissa* creatives had an approach to Jewish life that was far more compelling to Next Gen Jews than what many legacy Jewish organizations routinely sponsored.

We identified 20 of the largest Jewish Federations in North America and invited the senior staff person charged with engagement and/or Jewish education to attend one of our *Kenissa* national convenings. This took place in March 2019 and March 2020. We limited the “establishment” professionals to 10 so as not overwhelm the 50-60 *Kenissa* creatives at each convening. We also asked the professionals from the legacy organizations not to speak during the plenary sessions. We knew that they would hear things that they would find troubling, if not triggering, and we did not want them to compromise the “safe space” that we worked hard to create.

With several years and a half dozen convenings under our belt, we knew that many of the creatives had ambivalent, if not negative feelings about the Jewish establishment, born of experience. There were women who found the Jewish establishment overly patriarchal, if not misogynistic. There were LGBTQI creatives who found the Jewish establishment, homophobic and clueless about queer culture. There were Jews who identified with the progressive left who felt that the Jewish establishment had not allowed free and unfettered debate about Israeli government policies in communal forums, labelling any critics of Israeli policies, “bad Jews”.

Expecting pushback on our “listen, don’t speak” policy from Jewish communal professionals who had taken the time to attend our gatherings, we explained our reasoning. We wanted them to take in the experience as if they were watching it from behind a one-way window, witnessing the conversation without affecting it. We also promised that on day 3 of the gathering, we would hold a “think tank” exclusively for the communal pros that I would staff, while the rest of the *Kenissa* staff would close the conference for the creatives. The questions we posed in that half-day think tank were: 1) What did you experience? 2) What did you learn that you did not know before? 3) What lessons will you take back to your communities as a result of your experience? It worked.

The feedback was amazingly similar. Sure enough, many heard things from the *Kenissa* creatives during the first two days that they found offensive and/or triggering. But, at the same time, they

walked away deeply impressed by the commitment of these Jewish entrepreneurs to Jewish values, Jewish living and Jewish engagement. And they were blown away by the creativity of the organizations that these young people had founded. Most of the communal professionals knew only a fraction of the groups represented in our *Kenissa* gatherings. One communal pro said to me that she felt she had entered an alternative Jewish universe that she had been unaware of. Admiringly she said, “this is the Jewish future”.

We found that a small handful of Jewish Federations were doing excellent work at both supporting and incentivizing what, we were calling, “emerging Jewish communities of meaning”. Those included the Federations in San Francisco, New York, Washington, D.C., and Atlanta. But most of the other Federations that sent representatives understood that there was a lot of work to be done if they were going to be successful at attracting Next Gen Jews into Jewish life. Many knew of initiatives like Moishe House, One Table and Honeymoon Israel. But those organizations were already success stories with budgets in the millions of dollars. The organizations in the *Kenissa* Network were much smaller in budget and scope, but each was already attracting younger Jews who would, otherwise, not be at all engaged in Jewish life.

Research and Community Impact Phase

Kenissa was not designed to be a permanent organization. It was designed to be an initiative with a fixed, seven-year time horizon. Phase 1, which included a continental mapping effort, convening of creatives and capacity building for Network members took place in the first five years. Our last National Consultation took place from March 1-3, 2020, at Hazon’s Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center in Falls Village, CT. Seventy-three people registered for that conference, including a contingent of representatives from Jewish Federations and other more mainstream Jewish organizations as described above. Everybody showed up. But on the last day of the conference, news broke about the Covid-19 virus spreading through the U.S. A week later, the Covid-19 pandemic was declared a national emergency.

To say that Covid-19 threw a monkey wrench into our plans for Phase 2 of *Kenissa* would be an understatement. Along with the entire country, it was next to impossible to conduct business as usual for close to two years. Jewish communities throughout the country did heroic work to handle essential tasks and could do little more than that. Many Jewish organizations had to cut their budgets to remain viable and we saw that some of the organizations in our *Kenissa* Network shut down as well. Some of the Jewish Federation professionals who had attended our Consultations, lost their positions.

In late 2021 we began working with Jumpstart Labs to create a national survey that would put the work of *Kenissa* into the larger context of new Jewish initiatives in the North American Jewish community. Jumpstart had done some cutting-edge research on the [Jewish Innovation Ecosystem in 2009 and 2010](#) but the work of *Kenissa* provided evidence that much had changed since those studies were published. We put the Survey of Contemporary Jewish Initiatives into the field in the fall of 2022 and surveys were collected through the first part of 2023. For a variety of reasons, the response rate of the wider field of new Jewish initiatives was not large enough to allow Jumpstart to do a comprehensive comparative analysis. However, we got a

robust return on the survey from the *Kenissa* Network, with more than 130 organizations responding, representing over one-third of our network. Data collection and initial quantitative analysis was done by [Evitarus](#), a public opinion research firm based in Los Angeles. [Jumpstart Labs](#) provided a summary analysis of the responses to the open-ended questions. [Dr. Debra Weinstein](#) developed the slide deck summarizing the findings, which we distributed nationally in May 2024 and can be [accessed on our website](#). *Kenissa* prepared this summary report independently based on these results.

It is important to note that the summary survey that we conducted of the *Kenissa* Network built on the first study that we commissioned from [Dr. Tobin Belzer](#) in 2016, after the first year of the initiative. Dr. Belzer’s study had a much smaller sample. At that point, we had only convened our first consultation with 60 organizational founders. We wanted to know more about the “creatives” we convened and the characteristics of the organizations that they created. That report was called [Jewish Communal Transformation: A Look at What’s Happened and Who’s Making it Happen](#).

Among the significant findings of Dr. Belzer’s 2016 study of *Kenissa*’s first participants were:

- 75% of the organizations represented were founded since the year 2000;
- The organizations put a premium on being “transformative”, “welcoming” and “non-judgmental”, characteristics that set them apart from many legacy Jewish organizations;
- The organizations’ greatest appeal was to Jews who were in their 20’s and 30’s;
- While those attracted to the organizations felt a strong affinity to the ethics and values of Judaism, their identities were more global and universal than particularistic;
- The Holocaust held limited emotional pull on the target audience and attitudes towards Israel were nuanced, with little reluctance to be critical of policies promoted by Israel’s government that appeared to violate Jewish values;
- Most participants identified as “just Jewish” or “post-denominational”, showing far less loyalty to Jewish denominations than previous generations.

The 2022 *Kenissa* summary study had a much larger sample to draw on, with over 400 founders and/or directors of organizations in the network. Some of the findings were quantifiable and are reflected in [the slide deck summarizing the results](#). Other findings emerged from open ended questions that allowed for narrative responses.

A few of the key findings include:

- Leaders of *Kenissa* organizations demonstrated a strong commitment to social justice, inclusivity, and community engagement. 40% of organizational mission statements reflected a focus on social justice and community engagement; 28% of the mission statements highlighted the importance of welcoming individuals from diverse backgrounds and identities.
- Approximately 60% of *Kenissa* responses mentioned the racial justice awakening, racial equity, and the Black Lives Matter movement as factors that deeply affected their organizations. Additionally, around 40% of the responses noted the impact of the Trump presidency, the coarsening political discourse in society, and challenges to democracy

in the United States and Israel. Among the strongest patterns among individual *Kenissa* leaders was explicit reflection on how various aspects of identity, such as gender, sexual orientation, race, and Jewish upbringing, shaped their work as leaders. Approximately 70% of the responses in the *Kenissa* group explicitly commented on how their identities have influenced their leadership. Many respondents mentioned their affinity to multiple identities and how those identities intersected to shape their work as leaders.

- Respondents highlighted the need to adapt and be flexible in their leadership approach, whether in response to changing circumstances, new technologies, or shifting priorities, including not least, the Covid-19 pandemic. Several organizations reported serious financial challenges. Many respondents noted the impact of the pandemic on their personal well-being and work-life balance. This included managing stress and the need for self-care. A few expressed feelings of exhaustion and burnout. That said, respondents also were intentional about reflecting on shifts towards more collaborative and inclusive leadership models, prioritizing work-life balance, and addressing social issues such as racial justice and patriarchy. Many respondents identified the transition to remote work as a significant change in their leadership. Several respondents mentioned the importance of building connections and networks, both within and outside of their organizations.
- Many respondents expressed frustrations with the established Jewish community's lack of support or understanding of their work. These were sentiments that often were expressed during our national convenings as well. Approximately 60% of the responses from the *Kenissa* group emphasized their achievements and the positive impact they have made, while around 40% expressed frustrations and challenges they faced.
- Many *Kenissa* leaders cited Jewish and personal values as the motivation for founding their organizations. The organizations they created were primarily in the sectors of Jewish education/learning, community building and spirituality. The last chart in our deck reflects how *Kenissa* organizations were distributed between the stages of organizational growth. Less than half had more than six months of cash reserves on hand, most still falling short of being fully stable and sustainable. Despite the challenges and frustrations expressed, respondents also highlighted the accomplishments and positive impact of their initiatives. They expressed a sense of pride and gratitude for the work they were doing.

What did *Kenissa* Accomplish?

From its inception, *Kenissa* stayed laser focused on its articulated mission. “*Kenissa*: Communities of Meaning Network connects individuals who are leading contemporary efforts to re-imagine Jewish life and community. *Kenissa* helps organizations build capacity and supports a network to help these emerging communities of meaning thrive. Communities of meaning are networks of individuals that are inspired by an idea or a practice that enriches their lives and/or significantly improves conditions in the world for others.”

Looking back on our work, we can identify tangible ways that we advanced this mission:

- We built, from scratch, a network of over 400 creatives who were leaders in efforts to reinvent Jewish life in six discrete and well-defined sectors.
- We had nine national convenings, bringing together about 300 of these creatives to meet each other, feel validated and “seen” for their efforts, develop collaborations with one another and attain knowledge and skills that would make them more effective organization builders.
- We kept members of our ever-growing North American network connected to one another by publishing a monthly newsletter that included features such as “Braver Leadership” (how to be a better leader); “Build and Raise” (how to raise money and create more sustainable organizations); and “How I Built This” (featuring success stories from our network of creatives).
- We presented our work to dozens of Jewish communities across North America, ranging from small leadership teams of lay and professionals who wanted to make Jewish life more engaging for Next Gen Jews, to large, public programs. Our most popular program was “The New Face(s) of American Jewish Life”, a power-point presentation that we continue to offer to excite new thinking about the American Jewish future.
- Our work was featured in national Jewish gatherings and publications such as [this feature article](#) by noted American Jewish journalist, Gary Rosenblatt.
- We provided thought leadership to the Jewish innovation ecosystem. From the start, we proclaimed to the Jewish community: [ideas matter](#). The Jewish communal apparatus is a multi-million-dollar generator of institutions and programs. But deep thinking about what we are doing and why we are doing it is not always in evidence. Jewish professionals and lay leaders who are making decisions and allocating resources in the Jewish community, would benefit from some of the thinking that was generated by the *Kenissa* project. That included our blog, with a wide array of [deep and thoughtful responses to the lead essay in Jewish Megatrends](#). It also included a mind-blowing [gallery of 30 graphic representations](#), produced by *Kenissa* creatives, of what Jewish life might look like if we started from scratch!
- We celebrated the emergence of other voices that are also producing important thought leadership for the Jewish innovation ecosystem. We particularly want to mention:
 - The writings of [Dr. Steven Windmueller](#), Emeritus Professor of Jewish Communal Studies at the Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles;
 - The book, *Warm and Welcoming: How the Jewish Community can Become Truly Diverse and Inclusive in the 21st Century*, edited by Warren Hoffman and Miriam Steinberg-Egeth (Rowman and Littlefield, 2022);
 - The book, *Awakenings: American Jewish Transformations in Identity, Leadership and Belonging* by Rabbis Joshua Stanton and Benjamin Spratt (Behrman House, 2022);

- The book, *Just Jewish: How to Engage Millennials and Build a Vibrant Jewish Future* by Rabbi Dan Horwitz (Ben Yehuda Press, 2023).

Hakarat ha-Tov/Acknowledgments

No project as complex as *Kenissa* can be done without a team and institutional support. We first want to acknowledge the support of the [William Davidson Foundation](#) that provided the financial support. Kari Alterman, the foundation's Director of External Affairs, was the person who first saw the promise of the *Kenissa* project and championed the work. The initiative was first incubated when I was a Senior Fellow at [Clal](#) under the presidency of Rabbis Irwin Kula and Brad Hirschfield. We then moved the project over to [Hazon](#), under the leadership of Nigel Savage, where the work complemented their Jewish Intentional Communities Initiative and [Hakhel](#), led by Aharon Ariel-Lavi, which was based in Israel and doing similar work to *Kenissa* but on global scale.

Kenissa had an amazing professional team that included, Hadar Cohen, Claudia Horwitz, Amanda Silver, Dr. Rob Weinberg, and Dr. Debra Weinstein. Contributing to the excellent content of our monthly newsletter were: Arinne Braverman, Dr. Erica Brown, and Ephraim Gopin. The support of the CEOs of our Co-Sponsoring National Organization's was also critical to our success. They were: Stosh Cotler (Bend the Arc); Rabbi Lisa Goldstein and, later, Rabbi Joshua Feigelson (Institute for Jewish Spirituality); Aaron Katler and Aliza Mazor (Upstart); Rabbi Elie Kaunfer (Hadar); Nigel Savage (Hazon); and Karla Van Praag (JOIN for Justice). Dr. Beth Cousens, as Associate Vice-President at JFNA, overseeing their engagement and Jewish education work, championed our work through the Federation system.

At the outset of this project, we were interested in finding partnerships in other faith communities to see if the phenomenon we were tracking had parallels beyond the Jewish community. We found a lot of interest existed in our project but no real partners who were doing work similar to ours. But we had a breakthrough when we found a short report called [How We Gather](#). It was written by two graduate students at Harvard Divinity School, Casper ter Kuile and Angie Thurston. Casper and Angie identified ten projects around the United States that were totally unconventional but filling many of the needs that faith communities historically had fulfilled. Remarkably, in the report, they identified themes common to the ten case studies which were almost parallel to the thematic sectors that we had independently crafted based on our early work with the *Kenissa* Network. I reached out to Casper and Angie and we began a rich intellectual and organizational collaboration that included their participation in *Kenissa* national gatherings and my participation in their national gatherings. Their work continues under the auspices of the [Sacred Design Lab](#) that they founded along with Rev. Sue Phillips.

Kenissa was not the first initiative in the Jewish community to focus on the Jewish innovation ecosystem. We stood on the shoulders of others who were working in this space prior to 2015 just as we hope that our work will inform and inspire others to continue the work. Among the groups that we want to acknowledge are: Joshua Venture (1998), Bikkurim (1998), UpStart (2005) and Present Tense (2007). In 2017, all of these groups merged under the auspices of UpStart, which created a [more integrated and robust, single organization](#). Slingshot (2003) remains an independent organization as of this writing and the annual guides to outstanding Jewish startups that it published from 2005-2018 brought valuable attention and, often, funding

to dozens of innovative organizations that have made valuable contributions to Jewish life. It should also be mentioned that an important study of the Jewish innovation ecosystem was published by Bikkurim in 2010 entitled, [From First Fruits to Abundant Harvest: Maximizing the Potential of Innovative Jewish Start Ups](#).

Last, but not least, this report benefitted from comments and editing by Aliza Mazor, Dr. David Michaels and Dr. Debra Weinstein.

Kenissa's Legacy

This report and summary evaluation brings *Kenissa* to a close. What we projected to be a seven-year project extended to almost nine years due to the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Ironically, we issue this report amidst another crisis—the October 7th atrocities by Hamas in Israel and the subsequent Israel-Hamas war in Gaza. Many voices in the Jewish community say that this is a time to circle the wagons, focus primarily on support for Israel and defense against a global rise in antisemitism. Jewish foundations are already re-assessing their priorities, shifting resources to a variety of responses to this crisis.

The Middle East crisis facing the Jewish community and the Jewish people is very real. The Jewish community has impressively rallied to raise huge amounts of dollars and, in a short time, created numerous programmatic responses to the crisis in Israel. Still, it is a mistake to delay efforts to make Jewish life more creative and compelling. The Jewish community's ability to be resilient in the face of crises depends on its ability to make Jewish life a source of meaning and human flourishing. Jewish identity in a free society is a choice. If Next Gen Jews experience Jewish life as simply a vehicle to respond to threats to Jewish survival, at home and abroad, many will choose not to engage at all.

From the outset, *Kenissa* was premised on the belief that Next Gen Jews were re-inventing Jewish life in exciting and compelling ways, even as there were many indicators that legacy Jewish organizations were losing relevance and market share. *Kenissa* was designed to bring national attention to that phenomenon, identify and convene the creatives that were founding new organizations that spoke to the interests of young Jews, and build bridges between these innovators and the organized Jewish community. We accomplished the first two goals with great success. The third goal continues to be a work-in-progress and we stand ready to serve as a resource to Jewish Federations, Jewish foundations and other interested parties that understand the importance of supporting efforts to re-think, re-shape and transform Jewish life and community.