

# Twentysomethings

*This is the first of what will be an ongoing feature in TIKKUN: A column that gives voice to the issues and concerns of people in their twenties.*

*In the past two years TIKKUN has been involved in creating an organization of twentysomething Jews, which calls itself Students for Judaism and Social Justice (SJSJ). (Because many of the participants are twentysomething Jews no longer in school, there has been some talk of changing the name.)*

*In the spring of 1993, SJSJ held two conferences: a founding gathering for the East Coast at Columbia and a second conference for the West Coast at Berkeley. From those two conferences we assembled a small group of SJSJers to discuss the issues their generation faces. Yigal Schleifer is a freelance journalist who interns at TIKKUN magazine. Daniel Fisher is a graduate student in clinical psychology at the University of California at Santa Barbara. Akiva Lerner is a student of history at the University of California, Berkeley. Rebecca Segall studies political science and women's studies at the State University of New York at Albany. Sunny Rosenfeld studies clinical psychology at the University of California at Santa Cruz. Michael Steinberg is a graduate student in cultural studies at New York University and an intern at TIKKUN magazine. Gayle Kirshenbaum is an editor at Ms. magazine.*

**TIKKUN:** What are the distinctive problems and issues facing what popular media are beginning to call "twentysomethings" today?

**Dan Fisher:** Our formative high school years were the "yuppie eighties" with an extreme of the "me" focus that had emerged in the seventies. That had a profound impact on our consciousness, accounting in part for the lack of social consciousness that characterizes many of us in our twenties. There was a very powerful emphasis on forging a materialistic lifestyle...

**Rebecca Segall:** Part of the "me" generation was encouraged by a fantasy that the major social problems had been solved by the generation of the sixties...so many of the people on my campus (SUNY Albany) tell themselves that racism and sexism have really been adequately addressed already and that only the most subtle forms of these problems persist. In the 60s nobody was denying the existence

of these problems.

**Michael Steinberg:** Actually, I find that many of my twentysomething peers today have a new sensitivity about injustice that may not have been true a few years ago. But the dissatisfaction with the world that they express often becomes merely a stance that sometimes leads people to become cynical nonbelievers in anything. And that stance, which manifests in a certain superficial identification with the language of "political correctness," is quickly shed when they enter the work world.

**Akiva Lerner:** A defining characteristic of our generation has been its aestheticization of politics. We've become comfortable with the destruction of any notion of a political totality about which we could think or in which we could act. There's an REM song that reflects this, with lyrics that say, "It's the end of the world as we know it and I feel fine." This has resonance with anarchistic movements of the past, and its basic notion is that the disintegration of society is something we should cheer on. Instead of reacting with horror and outrage over this disintegration we respond to it as an aesthetic moment. Politics ought to be a realm in which people interact with each other and come to decisions about how they ought to govern their lives. By turning politics into art or media events, whether it be the dramatization of smart bombs destroying Iraqi civilian populations or the reduction of the presidential campaign to playing sax or "Rocking the Vote," people's ability to authentically interact and make reasonable decisions is undermined.

The notion that I think is shared by many of our generation is that somehow through the disintegration of our social and economic order something new and better will emerge.

Art used to be emblematic of some kind of resistance to hegemonic systems, but now art concentrates on color and flash that capture our senses but don't transform our consciousness. It no longer seeks to express a deeper social desire for a different order. In America in the fifties or maybe even the sixties one could talk about the dominant society (bourgeois, increasingly becoming suburbanized, dominantly white) and then "the others" (Blacks, homosexuals, Jews, etc.). But with the disintegration of the larger totality, many more people are claiming "otherness"

as their primary identity, there is no longer a sense of a singular cohesive something that keeps us together, a hegemonic culture against which the others get defined. Whereas before one might have imagined a single painting with a variety of different colors, today the society feels more like a mosaic of distinct tiles, none of which interact with the others, and they are kept together only by some underlying cement. In this context, there can't be a counterculture, but only countercultures. And whereas I know that there was more than one counterculture at various moments in the past, today it almost feels as if the society is constituted by nothing more than a variety of different competing countercultures.

P.C. politics reflects this fragmentation. Through its implicit celebration of various racial and sexual particularisms it sometimes thwarts efforts to create a unified vision of the society or how to change it, or efforts to get people to join with each other. P.C. is a politics of linguistics—people take on “radical identities” that maintain the hyperindividualism of the 80s, now manifested in social groups. Our generation is caught with this paradox: we want to express solidarity with subjugated peoples but at the same time we express ourselves in categories that make it very difficult to connect and involve ourselves in social transformation.

**Gayle Kirschenbaum:** In the 80s we stopped seeing the government as a viable vehicle for social change. So the campaigns for gender, class, and race consciousness on campus reflected our awareness that it might only be in a smaller arena like the campus that we would have any social power to influence the society. And that focus should be validated, because these struggles did have an impact on the consciousness of many of those who are now working in the society and in more established political organizations.

Moreover, the impact of movements of the sixties and seventies, particularly for young women, is that many of us entered political life with higher expectations for ourselves and our society than our mothers had. We expect everything from ourselves and nothing from the government around us. It is this tension that has defined our generation up till now.

**Sunny Rosenfeld:** What most characterizes our generation is a certain kind of cynicism—the ability to have piercing insight into each thing, to be able to give the three-line dissection of each argument. We have insight but no transcendence—we don't come together to create something after we've expressed our cynicism, so we are left with a hyperindividualistic apathy. Even when people do develop some kind of political consciousness, for example, in the women's movement, people are very

factionalized. So we have African-American women's groups, lesbian women's groups, older traditional women's organizations, newer organizations that express the needs of younger women, but there is very little coming together.

**Yigal Schleifer:** This is the first generation to be raised by the social developments of the sixties, by women dealing with feminism and fathers who had liberated or “trying-to-liberate-themselves” wives, and the conflict that this brought about was part of our upbringing. Our parents were trying to incorporate these things, but hadn't fully figured out how to do so. And all this may have been confusing for our generation.

**Segall:** I wouldn't want to exaggerate how much our P.C. consciousness has really permeated most students on campus today. Apart from a small group of activists, the ignorance, apathy, racism and sexism remains pervasive. It's not like the sixties.

**TIKKUN:** It was like that for most of the sixties as well. Only a minority of people shared the movement's consciousness about imperialism, racism, or sexism. Some counter-culturalists self-consciously decided to forge the myth of a generational consciousness, hoping to use that myth to open young people to progressive ideas by suggesting to them that they weren't “really” part of our generation unless they shared these ideas. The whole notion of a “youth culture” was forged by people who wanted to convince others that there was something profoundly revolutionary in the needs that had drawn them to rock music, drugs, and other unconventional activities. The amazing thing is that eventually this myth began to constitute a new way of people seeing themselves, so that the generational definition became one of rebellion and questioning authority. In winning hegemony over that generational definition, however, we were often involved in trying to convince people that they ought to see themselves in a certain way, not simply describing how they did see themselves.

**Rosenfeld:** The Vietnam War helped you get a cohesiveness that we don't have today. Environmentalism isn't linked to African Americans, or those two to lesbianism. It's very difficult on campus to build links between these different movements, in part because there is a real resistance to totalizing ideologies that suggest that we have something in common. There is such a fear that any emphasis on commonality will mean that our individual or particular voices will not be heard, so universalist ideologies are suspect.

I'm hopeful that this is a stage, and that it's just at this

moment that people need a context to talk to people who share similar problems—Jews need a place to talk to Jews, lesbians to lesbians, African Americans to African Americans, but that eventually there will be a time that we can transcend this and get together. I don't know if this is going to be transcended very soon—but perhaps in saying that I'm simply mirroring the cynicism of my generation.

**Lerner:** Every generation tends to see the categories it has been given as defining how things really are, and seeing the world as permanently being that way. Part of my involvement in *TIKKUN* magazine's student outreach organization, Students for Judaism and Social Justice (SJSJ), derives from my hope that we might be able to bring people together who share a sense of the possibility that we might change the cynicism and the fragmentation. I'm hoping that the dialogue and action SJSJ facilitates will provide a way to break through the despair, and that I can meet other people who share a desire to participate in that process.

**Kirshenbaum:** But isn't the drive toward particularism sometimes a positive thing? I think it may be a process that we need to go through before we can connect in larger communities. Groups that define themselves according to aspects of their identity are doing something positive.

**Rosenfeld:** I do see a lot of good things that have come from this "P.C." movement and its embracing of particularism. I think it is good that our generation has become sensitive to the whole "responsibility of speech" so that it knows that there are things you can't say anymore. But the problem is that P.C. has been effective only in the realm of linguistics and not in the realm of action. Corrective speech doesn't lead beyond itself.

**Segall:** Don't forget that the whole creation of the term "politically correct" was done by people who were trying to silence those of us who were politically active—we in the social change movements didn't develop this concept. And our attempts to recreate an English language that is less racist, sexist, and homophobic is political action.

**Schleifer:** With the election of Clinton twentysomethings came out in force, and this is the first administration in which we are beginning to explore what it might be like to interact with government. We are wondering what our access is going to be. If the administration is truly accessible, it might take away some of the apathy of the past; but if our generation comes to feel

that the access promised was only a manipulation to get our votes, then it may create an even deeper cynicism.

**Lerner:** Clinton ought to help create twentysomething town hall meetings on campuses around the country, and listen to them. If he showed a serious interest in those meetings, he might help recredit the public sphere as a place where the discourse different groups need to engage in could take place.

**Rosenfeld:** The Clintons could be a very important model for our generation: they are the first two-income couple to be in the White House, and there's quite a bit of excitement about the role that Hillary has been taking. Their relationship is a model that really encourages people in our twentysomething generation. But except for that relationship, which is very important, I don't feel that Clinton has done anything since taking office that really does speak to my generation.

**Kirshenbaum:** People suspended their disbelief long enough to be part of the campaign. But for the political activists of my generation, our involvement in grass roots activism is the shaping experience that will continue to influence how we relate to the Clinton experience. We will bring that to our involvement with government.

**Steinberg:** One problem anyone wanting to change things faces is that in American society as a whole there has been a disappearance of public spaces. We feel much safer in the small groups that are pockets of otherness. But it's very difficult to have contact with the overall society—the only way we do rub up against it is when it is oppressing us.

**Rosenfeld:** We have so much language of community—"the women's community," "the African-American community," the "academic community,"—and yet I think most of us really feel very little sense of being part of community or even of knowing what this sense of community would feel like. Our generation sees itself as critics, not as part of something. And since media-generated styles come and go so quickly, most of us are afraid to be in to any particular identity, to get "typed" as some specific thing which will be gone just as we are getting into it, so we are constantly defining ourselves as "other."

All the big labels have died—communism is dead, socialism is dead, every totalizing ideology that sought to create community is seen as likely to lead to a totalitarianism.

**Lerner:** Perhaps Judaism and the Jewish people offer another model—a worldview that does commit itself to social change but that does not totalize in the way that

many of the Western social change ideologies do. Judaism has allowed for a pluralism of expression and belief, and that may have contributed to its strength as an ongoing community. If we want to build social change, we need first to reconstitute feelings of community and a sense of commitment to each other. Those are prerequisites for anything else to happen, and Jewish experience has much to teach us about how to sustain an ongoing community.

**Segall:** Unfortunately, until TIKKUN came along, the organized Jewish community was so very conservative—so these small communities can also be problematic. For example, on my campus the group planning a Holocaust commemoration wouldn't let the gay group on campus speak or pass out pink triangles as part of the commemoration. And many of those involved in the Zionist groups on campus make outrageously racist statements and they have little consciousness about this. The Zionist groups only care about Jews but they don't see or care about anyone else's oppression—that is simply not part of their agenda.

On the other hand, the progressive groups on campus are very insensitive to Jewish issues. They are often explicitly anti-Zionist, and they do little to understand anti-Semitism as a social disease or to include Jewish experience in their analysis of oppression.

Professor Jeffries came to speak on my campus. The most politically active group on campus is called the National Women's Rights Organizing Coalition. This group always protests whenever any hateful fascist oppressive speaker comes to campus, and they protest against professors on campus accused of racist or sexist actions; or against visiting speakers who have anti-abortion or anti-gay perspectives. But when Jeffries came they handed out literature about why to be against Zionism.

We also had a visit from representatives of Pan-Africanists whose talk was advertised with posters saying that the topic would be "Why it is essential to smash Zionism in order to uplift the Black Nationalist movement." I sat in the back and at first the speaker said very valid and wonderful things about the disempowerment of Black people in this country and the need for an immediate remedy. He gave a historical analysis of why people have a connection to Africa as the homeland. But then he started to give an analysis of Jewish history and stated that there was no such thing as the Jewish people, that it was only a religion, that the whole idea of having a Jewish state was merely a political idea and had no connection to Judaism, that Jews were major participants in the slave trade, and then went on to make a series of "humorous" put-downs against Jews. What amazed me most was that the white socialists in the audience, members of the International Socialist Organi-

zation, were also applauding all this, laughing at the anti-Semitic "jokes," and generally participating in this problematic scene. This is not progressive behavior.

I wrote an article in the newspaper in which I tried to explain the similarities between Black nationalism and Zionism, how they can at times be distorted and become fascistic, and also why, in the context of a white Christian world, both are necessities for survival for these two people. And I challenged the problematic statements that the speaker had made. My housemate, a leader in one of the campus feminist organizations, reacted to this by telling me that Israel was an imperialist tool created and used by the European countries and America to function as a police state within the Middle East. I tried to give her the history of Jewish experience, and a more historically nuanced account of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

It was very important to me that I have had TIKKUN and *The Socialism of Fools: Anti-Semitism on the Left* (Michael Lerner's book) to bolster my arguments. They've given me some concrete assistance in figuring out how to respond to progressives who make these kinds of statements.

But, as I said, the problems are there in the Jewish world as well. I was a leader of the Zionist youth group Young Judea for six years, but when in college I became best friends with a lesbian, I found that my old comrades were spreading rumors about my sexual orientation that spread like wildfire through the whole Young Judea network.

That wasn't easy for me. Israel and this community of young Zionists was very important to me. I had found it difficult to critique Jewish behavior or Israeli politics up till then, but now I was given the space to rethink these issues.

I began to distance myself from many of the Jews I had known before this time, but I didn't want to give up my Judaism. So I began to read Jewish feminist thinkers and others with a social justice orientation toward Judaism. I found within TIKKUN many important articles that helped me think things through. Now I feel I am finally finding a humanistic and Jewish approach toward political activity.

**Steinberg:** Before I became active with TIKKUN, I had started to wonder why I ought to remain connected to Jewishness. I came from a Reform Judaism background but what I got there was just decoration, a Judaism that appeared only at holidays a few times a year but that didn't engage me or try to engage me in a deeper and more regular daily way.

**Schleifer:** And Jews growing up in the Jewish world rarely find a Judaism that allows or encourages any real activism. Conversely, the social movements never really

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developed a Jewish component. Jews tried to not make a big deal of their Jewish identity. So finding a Judaism that has a serious social justice component is very hard.

**Lerner:** One issue twentysomething Jews face is the question of how to relate to Israel. Unlike many Jews in their thirties and forties, by the time we came to political awareness Zionism was already a very problematic issue. We don't have memories of the '67 war or the '73 war. Our memories are more of the Lebanon war and the massacres of Sabra and Shatilla, and then the subsequent struggles during the Intifada—and that has shaped our awareness of Israel. Much of American Jewish relationship to Jewishness in the past few decades has revolved around their relationship to Israel, but for our generation there is more of an effort to break away from that way of defining our Jewishness, to reconcile ourselves to Galut (to the Diaspora) and this gets reflected in the revival of interest in Yiddish as an attempt to come to terms with what is positive in their Galut identity.

A second issue for us is how to deal with our particularism, particularly in light of the universalism that has attracted so many Jews ever since the Emancipation. Since part of what many Jews have been trying to do for the past two hundred years is to emphasize our universalism, Black nationalism and other particularisms offer a special challenge, since they implicitly ask us to celebrate our own particularism. Our generation's task is to navigate through this complicated situation of how to develop a particularism that keeps in-tact our sense of universalism.

**Kirshenbaum:** The American Jewish community I've been familiar with has acted as a community under seige. My grandparents have great difficulty in understanding why our precarious situation as Jews in the world isn't enough reason to keep our generation within the Jewish fold. What they have difficulty with also is seeing Judaism as a spiritual path for getting meaning. To the extent that we develop a distinctively Jewish spiritual path, we would then be moving closer to a universal concern for spirituality.

**Steinberg:** Twentysomething Jews either don't connect to Judaism at all, or else they connect to their own branch of Judaism very strongly and don't care about or connect with any of the other Jews. So Jewish particularity doesn't manifest in one community, but in a wide variety of splintered communities.

**Lerner:** It's important for us to find a way to articulate

our particular identity in ways that are positive and yet don't exclude us from participating in the general unfolding of the country. In the Jewish world we need both to incorporate the consciousness of race, class and gender and to avoid the ways that those categories become too limiting. Otherwise, Judaism is going to be left to the Schneersons [Menachem Schneerson, leader of the Lubavitch Hasidim], and most everyone else will walk away. Because of the Intifada, Israel as a sacred cow for American Jews has become increasingly problematic.

**Schleifer:** That's why SJSJ and TIKKUN could be so important to students. People on campus come to Hillel for a bagel brunch or for a Sukkot party or Purim party, but it doesn't really offer a place for young Jews to look at Judaism in a progressive way. TIKKUN and then our SJSJ conference created a way for people to connect. At the SJSJ conference it was wonderful to see how excited we were to meet each other, to find other twentysomethings who shared similar interests and who were thinking about the same issues, and who still wanted to be Jewish in their lives. It was almost like finding an oasis. Part of what excites people about SJSJ is that we don't focus just on security for the Jewish people. Our generation is one that grew up in a world in which Jews felt safe and secure in America, so it doesn't have the fire under its butt of worrying about our survival—so it needs to be appealed to in a different kind of way.

**Lerner:** Yigal is right, we need a Judaism that transcends a focus on our collective pain and our fears for future survival that have largely been focused on support for Israel. Our challenge is to develop a spiritually and ethically based connection to Judaism. □

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