

GAP YEAR DISPATCH

Gap Year Program Tests Questions Of Identity, Faith

Kivunim makes a case for a universalistic Judaism geared toward a new generation. Will it stick?

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Kivunim participants frolicking in the Sahara Desert. Emma Goldberg/JW

‘What was the first word that God spoke to a human being?’ Evan Charney turns to gaze through the bus window as I think over his prompt. Outside, the highway speeds by us; we are en route from Casablanca to Rabat.

The first word that God spoke to man, I muse. Was it a command? Something about staying in the Garden of Eden, or avoiding the fruit of its trees? It’s a question, Charney adds, and I think: figures. An instruction would have been too easy.

‘The first word God spoke to humans was ‘Ayecha?’ ‘Where are you?’’ He pauses. ‘Now isn’t that humbling? Isn’t that radical? That’s something you can wrestle with, that’s something you can wake up every single morning and ask yourself. Where am I? Why am I here? Where can I find meaning in this place?’

I am sitting on a bus full of North American students enrolled in a pre-college gap year called Kivunim; Charney is a program alum and current counselor. Through the bus window, I can see dusty red terrain and eucalyptus trees bending towards open sky. The Moroccan landscape can start to feel like the American southwest, until my peripheral vision catches a stork gliding by, or meets the eyes of a nearby driver wrapped in a hijab. Then I am reminded of the raw unfamiliarity of it all and it feels like a camera lens coming into focus.

“In some senses, it’s a question I’ve been wrestling with my whole life,” Charney continues. “I was the only Jewish kid in a class of 400 in Tulsa. My parents made me stay 30 minutes for Shabbat dinner before I’d run off to the Friday night football game. Then I’d go recite the Lord’s prayer in Catholic school. I think I was always asking myself ‘Ayecha?’ Where am I?” He remembers desperately wanting to reject his Judaism; now it’s at the core of his work.

Charney’s story is interesting by any standard, but in the context of today’s socio-cultural moment it’s almost revelatory. How did a young reluctant Jew from America’s Bible Belt find his faith? Not just any form of faith, but a practice that pushes him to wander far from the confines of home, to break beyond his bubble instead of turning in?

Faith leaders today face a crisis: how to make religion feel relevant to the questions and experiences of modern, especially millennial life. In the United States, fewer young people identify as religious than in any other living generation. In 1991, just 6 percent of Americans described their religious affiliation as “none.” Today, that number is 25 percent, making this segment the country’s largest single “religious group.” Many fill the God-sized hole in their lives through an obsessive devotion to their jobs, what the Atlantic’s Derek Thompson calls workism. Others look for meaning that’s more readily accessible: in politics, CrossFit or Soul Cycle, even Instagram.

There’s a worrying subgroup who find religious meaning in identities predicated on tribalism, on in-group and out-group mentalities that often breed bigotry and sometimes violence. With that insular face affixed to religious practice, it’s no surprise that the globalized millennial cohort is turning away. Where’s the church of empathy? Where’s the religion of connection, of openness, of curiosity about the other instead of dogma about the self? These are some of the questions drawing the 53 Kivunim students on a journey through Morocco — a trip demanding that they rethink their understanding of where religious identity fits into an interconnected global community and secular life.

Encountering the Other

Activist and educator Peter Geffen founded Kivunim (dual translations: directions, intentions) in 2005, but the program’s story begins decades ago, amidst the fight for civil rights.

It was 1965. Along with a group of Columbia University students, 19-year-old Geffen traveled down to Orangeburg, S.C., in an effort to register black voters. He describes it as his first serious encounter with people who he’d been taught to view as “other,” the first fracturing of that comfortable division between himself and those outside his circle of trust.

Geffen became a staff member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. In 1968, when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, he traveled down to Atlanta to assist with preparations for the funeral. He was assigned to walk alongside two civil rights luminaries in the procession: Sen. Robert Kennedy and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, his mentor. It felt at the time, Geffen recalls, like “the world was collapsing.” It was just five years after President John F. Kennedy had been killed, just five days after the civil rights movement’s father figure had been shot dead. Walking through the streets as mourners cried, Geffen turned to Heschel in anguish.



Participants praying on the Kivunim trip. Emma Goldberg/JW

“What are we to do?” he asked.

The future felt dark and uncertain — not unlike it does today.

For some time, Heschel did not respond. They continued to march. Then, slowly, the rabbi spoke: “You must teach the children a Judaism that can remake the world.”

For Geffen, that invitation provided a critical reframe for both his religious practice and social justice work. Many religious leaders preach tolerance or service. But engaging with faith in a way that allows for a total remaking of our world, our worldviews, our relationships, our consciousness? This was something new. It was something necessary for a moment — like 1968, like today — with challenges too complex for outdated paradigms.

Geffen’s career has included many different responses to Heschel’s invitation. There were decades of involvement in Arab-Israeli peace initiatives. There was his creation of the Abraham Joshua Heschel School on the Upper West Side, a pluralistic Jewish day school with a focus on social justice. Kivunim is a culmination of these different innovations in dialogue and education. It’s a gap year program committed to cultivating “world consciousness.” It teaches a religious identity rooted in something deeper than tolerance — curiosity, a genuine devotion to learning about others and finding their points of intersection with the self.

While based in Jerusalem, Kivunim students spend their year studying and then visiting Jewish communities around the globe: in Greece, Albania, Bulgaria, India, Morocco, Germany, Hungary, Portugal, Italy, the Czech Republic, Spain. They learn Hebrew and Arabic. They learn the history, culture, food, dance, and music of the different countries they explore; when they travel, they augment their classroom lessons through conversation with guides, shopkeepers, random people on the street. I joined them for two weeks in March, for the Morocco portion.

It’s an ambitious experiment in a type of education made for a truly globalized world. The Western experience — not

just of Judaism, but of work and life — is de-centered. Students learn about cultures they've only seen exoticized. The foreign becomes familiar, which is particularly jarring to some when that means Jewish travel through the Muslim world. Personal and spiritual growth aren't byproducts of this curriculum; they're the very point of it.

Eli Gordon, one of the program's participants, says over the course of his year on Kivunim he's felt his religious practice shift. Faith used to feel like one disconnected fragment of his identity; now it's becoming a lens through which he examines bigger questions, from the global to the personal. His religious identity means something deeper than his parents' rules for the Sabbath, or summers spent at Jewish camp.



Praying and listening to Moroccan musicians in Telouet. Emma Goldberg/JW

“Because this program takes us to learn about the Jews of India, or the Jews of Morocco, it lets us use Judaism as a vehicle to see the world,” Gordon says. “And because of that it attaches Judaism to the way I’m going to live my life in the future.”

Beyond liturgy and beyond commandments, there’s something more fundamental: a way of understanding the human community and our place within it. Or a prompt to question: Where am I? Who am I when torn from my roots? Who might I become?

A Very Moroccan Story

There are few places better for grappling with thorny, contradictory questions of identity than Morocco — a rapidly modernizing monarchy, a Muslim country steeped in Jewish history. As recently as the 1940s Morocco boasted a

Jewish population of 300,000, which has now dwindled to just under 3,000. Jewish presence in the country dates back to the sixth century B.C.E., in a history marked by remarkably peaceful coexistence with Muslim neighbors. Andre Azoulay, senior adviser to King Mohammad VI, has had a hand in shaping that history. On the morning Kivunim arrives in Rabat, he sits with the students to share his story as the highest-ranking Jew in the Arab world.

As Azoulay speaks, the paradoxes unfold. He is a Jew, an Arab, and a Berber. He grew up a Marxist, then became an investment banker in France; he spent his teenage years advocating against the regime, and now serves as an advisor to the King. “I was very leftist at a young age, I was fighting the regime. I was exiled and then I reconnected with the king. He said maybe he was wrong to exile me and he called me to be his adviser,” he says with a chuckle. “That’s a Moroccan story.”

The Kivunim students ask him whether he ever feels unsafe, as a Jewish leader navigating the Arab political sphere. He responds that he will feel safer once there’s a peaceful resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He also urges the students to study Morocco’s history of Jewish-Muslim coexistence, which he sees as a story of religious tolerance that should serve as an example to the global community. Azoulay believes that his country operates in a unique paradigm; Moroccan Muslims don’t just respect their homeland’s Jewish history; they’re proud of it and work to preserve it. In 2010, King Mohammad VI initiated a program to restore hundreds of Jewish cemeteries and synagogues throughout the country. In 2011, he enshrined Judaism in the country’s constitution as a core component of Moroccan identity.

The country’s veneration for its Jewish history is something the Kivunim students analyze as they visit Judaic institutions in every city: a school in Casablanca, a cultural center in Essaouira, a synagogue in Marrakech. In Rabat, they meet with Elmehdi Boudra, founder and president of an organization called Mimouna that educates young Moroccans about the nation’s Jewish history. In 2011, the group hosted the Arab world’s first-ever Holocaust remembrance conference, with support from Geffen and Kivunim.

Azoulay and Boudra both inform Kivunim students that their gap year program has become a part of the Moroccan Jewish story. In 2015, at the program’s 10-year anniversary celebration, Kivunim posthumously awarded King Mohammad V with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr./Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel Award at a ceremony in New York City, honoring the monarch’s efforts to defend Moroccan Jews during the Holocaust in defiance of the anti-Semitic doctrine of Vichy France. Princess Lalla Hasna accepted the honor. King Mohammad VI offered words of praise for Kivunim.



A Moroccan drummer plays near a bonfire in Telouet. Emma Goldberg/JW

“These students, who are members of the American Jewish community, will be different people in their community tomorrow,” wrote King Mohammad VI of Kivunim. “Not just different, but also valuable, because they have made the effort to see the world in a different light, to better understand our intertwined and unified traditions, paving the way for a different future, for a new, shared destiny full of the promises of history.”

A Muslim monarch honoring a group of Jewish youth — that too is a Moroccan story.

As the Kivunim students reflect on Azoulay’s address, one poses a challenge to the regime’s senior adviser. Marisa Senkfor asks whether she understands Moroccan Jews as a “museum,” as a relic of the past. Implicit in her words is a deeper question, one that the students have asked throughout their trip: Does Moroccan Jewry have a future?

Azoulay tells her that he’s optimistic. To him, its future is about more than the number of Jews on Moroccan soil. It’s the spread of Moroccan Jews across the globe, sharing their rituals and history. It’s a “mindset,” he says, one embedded in the Moroccan national identity. Besides, he adds, thousands of Jews from around the world continue visiting Morocco; an estimated 45,000 Israeli tourists come annually, learning the story of a Jewish community that made its home on Muslim land.

Azoulay asks the Kivunim students whether they knew that historically Morocco and Israel had diplomatic relations, before the Israeli-Palestinian peace process derailed. He recalls when Yitzhak Rabin visited Rabat: “I share that memory so we can know the art of the possible,” he says. In Morocco’s Jewish-Muslim history is the glimpse of a potential future. To remake the world, you have to study it.

Earth and Sky

On the third day, we awaken when it’s still dark. The students mount camels that carry them deeper into the Sahara.

The sky softens from indigo to a textured orange-blue. In the light, we see the dunes climbing one another in some mysterious ascent toward the point where cloud meets earth. “Ok so this is why people believe in God,” says one student, Alexia Beller, as she watches her classmates dig their toes and fingers into the sand.

After sunrise, we visit a Moroccan-Jewish cemetery housing Rabbi Yaakov Abuchatzera’s grave. We learn that thousands of Jews pay tribute to him each year by visiting his tombstone and tucking notes of prayer into the walls of his nearby synagogue. “This mysticism doesn’t sit comfortably with Westerners like us,” Geffen says. “We have a tendency to dislike things we don’t understand. I urge you to suspend yourself beyond that limitation. Think back to where we were this morning, on the dunes. That’s the essence of kedusha [holiness], of creation.”

Part of Kivunim’s academic approach involves an expansion beyond the rational, methodological approach to learning familiar to most North American students. (Geffen kicks off the year, on Sde Boker, with a Paul Simon quote: “When I think back on all the crap I learned in high school, it’s a wonder I can think at all.”) In particular, Kivunim offers an opening from Western to Eastern thinking. This begins with the students’ travel to India and Tibet, where they meet with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. They study with a monk, Geshe Damchoe, who takes up residence in Jerusalem with them for the weeks preceding the trip. In Morocco, they spend bus rides exchanging books by Buddhist thinkers Osho and Mingyur Rinpoche. “I feel like Kivunim has helped me get out of this Western notion that one thing can’t be another,” says participant Theo Canter. “I’ve gotten comfortable with contradiction.”

That exposure to mysticism is well suited for a pre-college gap year. It provides a challenge to students’ reason and intellect, an invitation to dive into their own inner lives in ways they haven’t been able to throughout the rat race of K-12 education.



Scenes from a Moroccan journey: Kivunim participants meeting with an adviser to the Moroccan king. Emma Goldberg/JW

Gap year programs have long been common in Europe, but in recent years they’ve become more popular in the U.S. The Associated Press estimates that somewhere between 30,000 and 40,000 American students take a break between high school and college. At its best, this year gives students the opportunity to disassemble their identities into raw

material and rebuild. Students are empowered to ask: When all the external value systems fall away — grades, internships, even home and family — what do you use to find meaning? They're transplanted into unfamiliar territory where they can abandon, or recommit to, everything that previously defined them: who their friends and relatives understand them to be, who they understand themselves to be.

“I feel like there's this constant conversation happening in my brain, and this year I've gained more space for it,” says Sara Rosin, a Kivunim participant. “I can let go of certain assumptions or insecurities and make room for questions that I really care about.”

In that sense, it's the perfect time for students to consider where religion will fit into their personal systems of meaning-making. While most other Jewish gap year programs offer one particular approach to this question, Kivunim gives an array and prompts the students to mix and match: there's daily prayer services, Jewish history lessons, introductions to ancient Hebrew songs and new Israeli rap. For some, this DIY approach to religious practice is uncomfortable; for others, it's exciting.

Anna Jonas, who went to the Modern Orthodox day school SAR Academy in Riverdale, said she associates her childhood experience of religion with an overwhelming feeling of guilt, a discomfort with her community's “sexist” traditions and a sense that she didn't fit in. “My family thought I was the problem child,” she tells me. “On Kivunim, I've felt like I can be connected to Judaism without feeling like I'm doing something wrong.”

For Jay Leberman, the program director, part of the aim of Kivunim is to expose students to the vastly different ways that they can integrate religion into their secular lives. Leberman models that by example. On one long bus ride, Essaouaria to Casablanca, he takes the aux cord and plays Wicked (“Defying Gravity”) then Eminem (“Stan”). The students are surprised to find he knows the lyrics. That's intentional: he's showing he can lead a morning prayer service, then sing along to rap. He demonstrates a religious practice that can easily embed in modern life: “It's all about the human relationships. Everything else is commentary.”

“Part of what's confronting American Jewry is the challenge of how a particularistic religion can survive a universalistic time,” he tells me. “I lead by personal example. I can daven [pray] in the morning, study text and then engage with secular culture. It's not one against the other; it's one embracing the other.”

According to Charney, it's a way of living that follows students long after they finish their gap year experience. “Kivunim kids are predisposed, when entering college, to engage with the grey area on every issue,” Charney tells me. “We have a hunger to listen. We ask big questions.”

Unlike questions that students learned to answer rationally in high school, those opened on Kivunim are more complex. They're questions that beget questions, demanding an intermingling of contradictory lifestyles, narratives, and truths. Barriers break down — between self and other, secular and sacred, the lessons of history and promise of tomorrow. As those old boundaries collapse, students are left to imagine what they might build.

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