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L. A. Woman

2008-04-18

The intercontinental JConnector dreams big

By Danielle Berrin, Contributing Writer

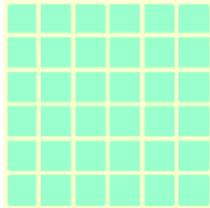


Michal Taviv/ Photo by Jonah Light Photography

Just try to put Michal Taviv in a box -- she won't fit.

She's a multinational citizen with passports from Israel and South Africa; she's at home in Pico-Robertson and comfortable traveling abroad; she's a double-degree business major who spends most of her time networking, matchmaking and community building. It's taken 30 countries, two homelands and finally Los Angeles for her to put down roots.

But instead of settling for the status quo, she's created the community she craves. Taviv is using her own religious struggles as a springboard to create a forum for young, disaffected Jews -- or more precisely, those who are disconnected from their Jewish roots.



She started small, organizing hiking trips, Shabbat dinners and parties, hooking herself into Jewish Los Angeles, hitting the scene and hoping that she could inspire a loyal following for her baby, [JConnectLA](#).

Enter Cheston Mizel, who had long been dreaming -- and seeding -- a new concept of Jewish unity. All he needed was a partner. Together the two created JConnectLA as a social networking "clearing house" for Jews between the ages of 20 and 40, of any background, affiliation or level of observance.

Now in its third year, JConnectLA's primary focus is bringing together these Jews from different backgrounds, providing them a space in which to commune and connecting them with organizations that can further develop their Jewish involvement.

Just don't confuse it with a singles organization.

When Taviv, 29, first arrived in Los Angeles from Israel three years ago, she didn't know where young Jewish singles could go to socialize. As she explored the city, she found that it lacked a social center where Jews of different cultural and religious backgrounds could come together as a community.

Taviv, an effervescent woman, devoted herself to reaching out to multicultural Jews. She hooked herself into any Jewish event she could find, hitting bars, clubs, concerts and shuls in order to inspire a following.

"So many young Jews are being ignited, and it's not necessarily in a religious or political way," she said, but people are yearning for ways to live a meaningful life.

"We want to live a life that allows us to contribute, that allows us to feel like the potential we have as human beings is being fulfilled, and it's really starting to come forth," she said.

Taviv didn't connect with religion until adulthood. The eldest of four siblings, Taviv spent her formative years in South Africa, raised by scientist parents originally from Russia. Her father, a nuclear physicist, and her mother, an engineer, both emphasized hard math over Judaism, reason over spirituality.

"Shabbat on Friday night was the only meal that we ate together as a family -- then we'd go watch TV or go out," Taviv said.

"I was suspicious of dogma, suspicious of institutions, of rules and regulations and definitely did not want to take on some system that I didn't understand, that just told me what to do," Taviv said.

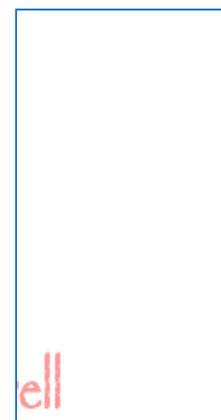
After her brother made aliyah and immediately entered yeshiva, her family thought he had been brainwashed.

Taviv went to Israel to investigate her brother, but she found herself relating to the multifaceted nature of Israeli society, and her trip became a catalyst for broadening her own Jewish journey.

"I think I was always a seeker spiritually, but I hadn't scratched beyond the surface of Judaism to see the value and the beauty of what was there," she said. "But once in Israel with open eyes and a more open heart, my soul couldn't help but respond."

After a sojourn that took her around the world, Taviv landed in Los Angeles, a multicultural hotbed that possessed all the ingredients of the diverse, dynamic community she desired.

In January 2006, as program director for Los Angeles Intercommunity Kollel (LINK), which she credits as a critical partner in helping launch JConnectLA, she was assigned to work with Mizel and build the grass-





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roots organization.

"JConnectLA started at the Shabbat table of Cheston Mizel, as an ingathering of the exiles," she said, betraying pride that the organization's unconventional roots reflect her own.

The founding partnership proved to be a lucky one. Although they had different roles, Mizel, as the primary fundraiser, and Taviv, as the programmer, shared the same vision: Jewish unity.

"Unfortunately, I felt like there wasn't enough conversation or dialogue happening here between the different groups, different cultural and religious backgrounds," she said.

Formed quickly through word of mouth and fueled by a handful of private donors who committed to a three-year operating budget of approximately \$250,000 per year, JConnectLA began attracting a vast network of multiethnic, multicultural Jews by offering Jewish-themed social programming. In only three years, it has increased its database from 800 to almost 4,000 people.

"This is the place where all Jews need to feel comfortable, where any Jew from any walk of life can feel a sense of belonging, a sense of welcome and kinship," Taviv said. "What we want, what we measure our success by, is if a Jew comes to one of our events and walks away feeling 'That was a good Jewish experience.'"

In order to appeal and be accessible to everyone, Taviv has been especially sensitive to ramping up religious standards to the highest level of acceptance so that even the most devout Jews can participate in their activities.

At their annual Purim party last March, black hats were bopping to the band Moshav in the same room as scantily clad Queen Esthers.

Taviv insists JConnectLA has no religious agenda.

"We're not trying to fundraise from them, we're not trying to make them religious, we're not trying to send them to Israel -- if all that stuff happens, fabulous! That's a byproduct," she said.

Perhaps the greatest impact of JConnectLA has been on Taviv herself, whose Jewish identity has deepened in tandem with the organization's growth. While she once identified as secular, Taviv is now shomer Shabbos and a regular in the Pico-Robertson hood.

"It definitely wasn't a quick jump," she said. "I've been slowly growing and progressing in my own observance levels for eight years, and, believe me, for every 10 steps forward, there are five steps back -- every connection point for me is so meaningful because I struggled to get there, but I own that struggle."

Although she is better known for her deftness as a social butterfly, Taviv's experience running large, multinational companies, such as management consulting firm IQ Business Group, may be the best-kept secret to JConnectLA's success. Taviv knows organization, building is about more than outreach.

"Institutions reduce people to numbers and there's a feeling of loneliness. Nobody wants to be a number, or a membership form, or another statistic on the trip to Israel," she said, explaining why, with all the various social groups constantly surfacing in the cityscape, JConnectLA may prove to have real staying power.

"We've got big dreams," she said.

Taviv might not have an agenda, but she's not shy about her purpose.



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"The mission is: You are a Jew," she said. "No matter who you are, you belong here; you're part of our family, we love and accept you the way you are, and we will do our utmost to make you feel included and loved in this space -- and that's huge."

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