

Creating a New Gateway to Jewish Experiences

by Abby Strunk

During the 1990's, involvement in BBYO, a pluralistic Jewish teen movement, was at its lowest in decades, with approximately 13,000 members participating in the organization's renowned leadership programs, AZA and BBG. What was happening in BBYO paralleled what the general Jewish community was experiencing. Involvement in Jewish activities amongst post-*b'nai mitzvah* teens had been on the decline for many years.

By 2004, as BBYO was bringing on new professional and lay leadership, new technologies, gadgets, and online networking communities started to reach a tipping point, infiltrating the everyday lives of teenagers. MySpace, iPods, blogs, texting, and ring tones, for example, became ubiquitous among the Digital Natives – those who grew up with digital technology.

With a charge from one of the Jewish community's leading philanthropists, Lynn Schusterman, to try innovative approaches to reverse the decline in Jewish involvement among young people, BBYO took a series of proactive steps to understand teens' interests, needs, and trends. Ultimately, BBYO underwent a major organizational overhaul to re-engage teens in Jewish life by providing new gateways to Jewish experiences.

Two years later, BBYO has an active online community – b-linked.org – for Jewish teens aged 13-18 to connect with one another and learn about a range of pluralistic opportunities for meaningful Jewish involvement. BBYO is open to building strategic collaborations with a myriad of community agencies – both Jewish and non-Jewish – to maximize its reach to Jewish teens, while providing Jewish educational tools and resources in an engaging, innovative way via b-linked. The "gateways" model is designed to open teens' eyes to the wealth of programming and activities available by any number of Jewish and secular institutional partners.

The Inception of b-linked.org



BBYO's approach was simple: Couple the real and virtual worlds, because in the lives of teens, there is no longer a sharp distinction. In October 2005, BBYO created b-linked.org, the first online social networking community (different from a traditional website in that users are able to create a profile and build a personal network to connect to other users, events and interests) for *all* Jewish teens – not just those involved with BBYO. b-linked meets teens “on their turf” – the Internet – and provide a “gateway” through which they can connect with other Jewish teens, participate in informal discussions, learn about and register for meaningful real-world Jewish experiences – all of which point toward lifelong Jewish engagement and connection.

There are several key reasons b-linked serves as a gateway to Jewish life for teens:

- *The Barriers are Low*
Online participation lowers most of the significant barriers associated with traditional Jewish involvement, including background/knowledge, geography, and cost. First, and perhaps most importantly, previous Jewish knowledge is no longer a barrier. In the online world, one can interact as an anonymous participant or a mere spectator without carrying the stigma of a high/low Jewish IQ. Additionally, geographic location is no longer a factor in one's ability to participate in some form of Jewish life, as b-linked eliminates all physical borders, enabling Jewish teens from around the world to readily build community and collectively explore their identity – and to do so on their own terms. Finally, because there is no cost of entry, socioeconomic status is less relevant.
- *Teens are Busier than Ever*
While teens are spending more and more time online (According to Nielson NetRatings, during the month of September 2006, teens spent an average of 26 hours and 48 minutes online, up 27% from an average of 21 hours and 4 minutes in September 2003¹), they are also over-extending themselves through increased academic and extra-curricular activities. Teens are “maxed out,” leaving less and less discretionary time for Jewish education. b-linked gives teens a way to fit Jewish engagement into their busy schedules.
- *Teens are Content Creators*
Perhaps one of the most critical transitions over the past several years has been that of teenagers moving from online content consumers to content creators. According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, fully half of all teens have created content for the Internet: blogs, websites, original artwork, photography, stories, videos or “mash-ups” (online content remixed into personal creations).² b-linked is a unique environment in that it marries social networking to a content site. It is designed to be driven by the users, allowing Jewish teens to share opinions, stories, and photos related to their own lives, including their Jewish experiences, resulting in personal and resonant content. At the same time, BBYO can make available Jewish content and opportunities for engagement.
- *Teens are Looking for Unconventional Ways to Connect*
Teens are seeking unconventional ways to connect to their religion. A 2006 Teenage Research Unlimited study, sponsored by BBYO, indicates that 68% of all teens say religion is important to them, but 92% of those teens want a better connection, and 52% of those same teens are seeking less conventional ways to connect.³ b-linked provides a non-traditional venue for teens to make Jewish friends and discuss not only Jewish topics, but also all kinds of topics that are important to them, from books, sports, and movies to addressing the situation in Darfur and the Arab/Israeli conflict. A critical aspect of b-linked is the fact that it serves, essentially, as a Jewish “virtual town hall” where the teens themselves set the agenda and perpetuate the content.
- *Viral Communication is Key among Teens*
Viral communication is a powerful force amongst teens. Because teens are inundated with marketing messages and opportunities, they are looking for filters – sources they view as credible, often their friends, to help them make decisions about what clothes to wear, what gadgets to buy, what websites to use (The Intelligence Group Trend School, July 2006).⁴ A viral network of teens builds on itself and retains vitality from the constantly growing network of users. Just as b-linked is marketed virally, or peer-to-peer, so then are the Jewish experiences being discussed amongst the b-linked users.

- *Teens Can Begin to Own their Jewish Community*
The teenage years are a time of “coming of age,” when teens are increasingly stepping into the role of “decision-maker.” As such, they may be examining the Jewish experiences that have had to determine what is personally fulfilling and meaningful. Because b-linked is a communal space for a vast spectrum of Jewish experiences, opinions, and stories, it serves as a tool for teens to build their own Jewish community and define fulfillment and meaning based upon their personal experiences and those of their peers.
- *Teens Can Access Jewish Content in New Ways*
b-linked provides a venue to share Jewish content with the teen audience in dynamic ways through e-cards, contests, and games in order to capture their attention, ideally leading them toward experiences of increasing meaning and substance. For example, a downloadable Passover holiday guide providing stories, games, and recipes may lead to a teen coordinating a more innovative family *seder* or curious to review the text in Exodus. Additionally, it may allow that same teen to “pay it forward” by sharing his/her learning with friends and family members.
- *Teens Need a Safe Space Online*
b-linked provides a safer alternative to other networking communities because, unlike websites such as MySpace, there are local professionals who review the site regularly, monitoring it for appropriateness of content and verification of user identity. In other words, in addition to the standard precautionary measures that are recommended to run a teen site, BBYO has a “real world check” on the virtual world to maximize the safety and security of b-linked users.
- *Virtual and Real Worlds Collide*
Finally, b-linked serves to complement teens’ on-the-ground Jewish experiences. Face-to-face interactions with BBYO, as well as other Jewish organizations like AIPAC, Panim, and JSU are supplemented with an online forum for continued connection and informal learning. After one teen’s experience at the AIPAC 2006 Policy Conference, he wrote on b-linked:

So in school today I talked for half an hour to my social (it’s what we call our like history and geography and current events) class about Iran and Hamas and AIPAC and everyone seemed so interested and understanding about the importance of standing up against Iran and Hamas, and behind Israel. It was great and made me happy.

b-linked as a Gateway

When BBYO created b-linked, the organization set out to create an online Jewish venue that would speak to teens’ needs and interests. Just under two years and 14,000 registrants later, b-linked serves multiple needs. As one b-linked user wrote on the site:

I love b-linked because it gives me an opportunity to meet other Jewish teenagers who enjoy the same things as me from all around the world.

Whether a teen initially uses b-linked to meet new people, stay connected with friends from camp, or talk to peers from other cities about topics of interest, there exists the potential for that teen to move along a continuum toward deeper Jewish education and involvement. That is BBYO’s ultimate goal.

Through b-linked, a teen can access content from MyJewishLearning.com about *Yom HaShoah*. They can find out about local Jewish activities or Jewish travel experiences, such as Panim’s Summer Jam, an advocacy seminar rooted in Jewish values, or BBYO’s Kallah program, a three-week Jewish enrichment summer experience designed to help teens explore their Jewish identity. b-linked users can chat with teens who have traveled to Israel and sign up for travel opportunities to their Jewish homeland. Teens can participate in photo and essay contests, where they have the opportunity to share pictures from and write about personal Jewish experiences. They can listen to and download music by up-and-coming Jewish artists, as well as share their own music. College-bound teens can connect online to those who will be attending their same college or university and make plans to connect on campus or even be roommates.

b-linked's "Ask the Rabbi" campaign enabled teens to ask a rabbinical authority questions about topics that are truly on their minds, including sex and drugs, keeping Kosher, and death and dying. Jewish teens from all different backgrounds took advantage of the opportunity – from a Conservative Jew looking for a second opinion about the existence of heaven and hell:

We were talking about Heaven and hell in my class, and my Rabbi told us that all Jews go to heaven, but that all Jews go through hell to get to heaven. That hell is not this fire, but this learning of what we have done wrong and understanding it, then we go to heaven but that hell is also only a few seconds long, not even a minute! Do you know where this comes from and what is your opinion on this, and is it true?

to the Jewish teen with little access to Jewish resources who wanted assistance on how to deal with a tennis match that conflicted with *Yom Kippur*:

You answered my question about my *Yom Kippur*/tennis dilemma. I live in Windsor, Ontario and the Jewish population leads to my synagogue not having a rabbi for me to confide in. I just wanted to thank you for your answer; it went straight to my heart and gave me a better perspective on the situation.

These are just a few examples of how b-linked serves as a gateway to Jewish learning. While the success of b-linked as a gateway cannot be measured solely by quantitative data, there are 1800 average unique users per week and 1310 average sessions per day. Additionally, there are more than 1000 b-linked "Groups" initiated by teens, including Jewish-related topics such as AIPAC Policy Conference and Passover recipes. And, with a new online system to make event registration easier and more accessible, there have been more than 14,000 event registrations through b-linked since August 2006.

More telling perhaps is what's happening on-the-ground. Involvement is on the rise, with close to 25,000 teens participating in BBYO-sponsored activities in 2006-07. Following is a snapshot of participation in several major events: BBYO hosted its largest-ever International Convention in Texas in February; a delegation of 250 teens proudly marched in the New York City *Salute to Israel Day Parade* in May; more than 300 teens made their voices heard at the New York City *Save Darfur Rally* in September; 2000 BBYO teens participated in J-Serve, the national day of community service for Jewish youth; and BBYO has expanded its Summer Experiences, reaching nearly 1300 teens with innovative opportunities to develop leadership skills, perform community service, explore Judaism and spirituality, travel the world, and get a jump-start on career development.

b-linked is not simply a venue for teens to "network" with one another. That is just the beginning. It is a space through which BBYO can inspire and share meaningful experiences with users and lead them on a path toward deeper Jewish education. Measuring a teen's progression along this continuum of Jewish involvement is difficult. It is BBYO's hope that strategic collaborations with educational partners will enable the Jewish community to make more of an impact – a measurable impact – on the Jewish education of its youth.

BBYO Seeks to Enhance Gateway through Strategic Partnerships

For many Jewish teens, especially those who would not otherwise be engaged in anything Jewish, b-linked is just the first stop en route to more meaningful Jewish experiences and, ideally, lifelong Jewish involvement. As part of its mission to reach more Jewish teens with more meaningful Jewish experiences, BBYO is looking to create strategic partnerships with Jewish educational and program providers, whereby more Jewish teens can be connected and more Jewish learning opportunities shared via b-linked. As Jewish educators, creating a bridge between online and offline experiences is a critical priority, as is promoting and energizing informal and formal Jewish education, in order to meet the needs and interests of teens, and, ultimately, achieve our collective mission – to strengthen the Jewish people.

To learn more about b-linked, contact Abby Strunk, BBYO's Director of Marketing and Communications (astrunk@bbyo.org; 202.857.6651), or Sarah Shapiro, BBYO's Online Initiatives Associate (sshapiro@bbyo.org; 202.857.6691).

ENDNOTES:

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