

Report to the Leichtag Foundation

Jewish Life in Coastal North County, San Diego

Focus Group Executive Summary

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Background

In January 2012, following an initial stage of interviews with community leaders, the Leichtag Foundation deepened its research efforts to understand Jewish life in Coastal North County San Diego, so that it can invest effectively in this area in the upcoming years. Over the course of four months, the Center for Leadership Initiatives (CLI) conducted eight focus groups with Jewish residents of Coastal North County. These groups were designed to provide the Foundation with a close look at Jewish life in the region through the lens of those who live it daily.

An Overview of the Focus Groups

The focus groups took place in two rounds, four in January and four in April. They involved Jewish residents of Coastal North County of different ages and affiliations. Participants were located through a variety of means, primarily through Jewish organizations that are active in the region. While other individuals were brought into several of the groups, the eight groups primarily included:

- College students who participate in Hillel programs at CSU San Marcos
- Parents of infants, toddlers and children under the age of five, including participants in the JCC's Shalom Baby program
- Adults in their late 20s and early 30s
- Residents of Seacrest Village Retirement Communities
- Residents of "North North County," including those identified by Chabad of Oceanside
- Interfaith and single parent families (a heterogeneous group, which also included individuals outside of this demographic)
- Parents of young school age children (a heterogeneous group, which also included individuals outside of this demographic)
- Long-term residents of Coastal North County

The focus groups were designed to survey the participants' experiences living in the region, with a focus on Jewish life and their interface with it.

Key Findings

While there was naturally a great deal of diversity in the room in terms of background, life circumstances and perspectives on Jewish life in Coastal North County, there were several themes that recurred, regardless of the age group.

1. Meeting Others

In each focus group, there was a palpable sense of excitement among the participants at meeting Jewish peers who they had never met before. This was particularly true for the 20s and 30s, the parents of infant, toddlers and young children, and the interfaith/single parent families groups. The Hillel students, who see their peers at Hillel events, and the Seacrest residents, who live together, were more familiar with each other, and the long-term residents group involved old friends who had not seen each other in years. In several cases, it took repeated efforts to get the participants to leave the room as they exchanged contact

information and shared resources. When asked about this phenomenon, they repeatedly spoke of the challenges of meeting their Jewish peers in the region. At times, they blamed the lack of services available and at times the nature of siloed life in North County. Most concluded the evening by thanking the facilitators and the Leichtag Foundation for the opportunity to meet new (and occasionally old) like-minded people. This is perhaps an unintended outcome, but one that cannot be overlooked.

It is important to note that there is a complex spectrum of activities that allow individuals to encounter each other, creating a subjective threshold that feels like community to them. Some rely on formal affiliations and membership in synagogues or other Jewish institutions. Others prefer informally arranged Jewish (or Jewishly-oriented) social networks, some of which are quite robust in North County.

2. Accessing Information

In each focus group, except for the Hillel group where Jewish life is centralized around one organization, the participants commented on the challenges in accessing information about the available Jewish resources in Coastal North County. From significant life rituals such as finding a mohel or a rabbi to perform a wedding to the more social elements such as meeting peers for cultural events, play dates or outdoor time, they spoke of the challenges of finding information on the Internet. Some spoke of actively searching for age-relevant events and ultimately choosing non-Jewish events because they were easy to find. Others spoke of needing the information to “come to them” in an encapsulated and easy to use fashion. Thus, it is not only a question of whether there is enough supply of Jewish activities to meet the demand but rather of a mechanism for the supply to reach the demand.

3. The Cost of Jewish Life

San Diego County is an expensive place to live. In almost every focus group, nearly all of the participants nodded their heads when asked if the high costs of being Jewish were barriers to community involvement. When striving to integrate formal affiliation in Jewish life, beyond the costs of housing, etc., many of the participants bemoaned the difficult decisions that they must make. For some this affected their forecasts about whether they would send their children to Jewish schools and affiliate with synagogues. Single parent families seemed the hardest hit by these prohibitive costs. This barrier to entry into formal dues-paying Jewish life, accompanied by the relatively limited number of offerings outside of these institutional frameworks, leaves a clear gap in provision of services to a significant percentage of the Jewish population of Coastal North County. They are interested in Jewish programs and services, but in most cases will not take the large leap of payment of membership dues, high tuitions or program costs, etc. that push the Jewish bar out of their comfort zone and financial capacity. Ultimately, they will have to be met where they are financially. Taking this theme one step further, some raised the question, “Don’t we need to do more to support Jews living in poverty?”

4. The Paul Ecke Ranch and the Question of Infrastructure

In April 2012, the Leichtag Foundation announced that it has the option to purchase the 67 acre Encinitas ranch just north of Seacrest and in close proximity to the YMCA and the Botanical Gardens. As the ultimate future uses of this property are in formation and will be phased and long-term, the foundation has begun gathering community reflections on how the land could best serve the community (and vice versa). This announcement, which preceded the second round of focus groups by a few weeks, was a significant topic of conversation in the final four focus groups. The participants were thrilled by the potential of the land and, with some guidance about likely limitations on its usage, generated a wealth of ideas about the multi-generational and cross-communal (Jewish / non-Jewish) functions that could benefit North County. A wide variety of themes arose in these conversations, including ideas that specifically reflected Coastal North County's environmental and cultural context. For example, urban farming was a relatively non-traditional concept for many of the older participants, but these participants quickly began to imagine its application. As one commented after some explanation, "Oh my! That's SO North County!" Many participants stressed that the land should be the location for a new kind of Jewish community center. Others felt that it should have a strong cultural emphasis with an outdoor amphitheater. The strong role of food in Jewish identity in Coastal North County dovetailed with the brainstorming around land usage at the Ecke Ranch, with some essentially thinking about Jewish life as being "from the farm to the deli." Among the other ideas regarding the Ecke Ranch were: supplying organic food to high end restaurants in North County (similar to Marin County's Green Gulch Center), accessibility of fresh food to populations in need, "kibbutz for a day" programs, Jewish service learning, a sustainability center, a solar energy / education center, outdoor rituals, and working the land for membership in programs.

Beyond the potential and long term use of the Ecke Ranch, participants in the focus groups repeatedly mentioned the need for physical infrastructure to meet their Jewish needs. For some, particularly those who had less experience in Jewish life, this involves building a traditional Jewish community center. However the majority felt that this model would not suit the North County Jewish lifestyle. They spoke of the creation of an entirely new type of communal Jewish center, which would not be affiliated with any one denomination or organization, would allow for use by multiple age groups and would be designed for the outdoor southern California life. Some recommended that the Tri-Cities area of Carlsbad, Oceanside and Vista ("North North County") be viewed as a hub area that may need its own physical infrastructure, whether rented, purchased or built. Many were excited by models such as the Sixth and I synagogue in Washington, DC or the Pearlstone Retreat Center in Maryland, which attract diverse segments of a local Jewish community.

5. The Role of Food

Food, food, food! The lack of a kosher or kosher-style deli was noted in all but one of the focus groups, as was the challenge of finding kosher food and Jewish products in the local supermarkets. For many, their ability to find Hanukah candles or matzah was the delineator for a community having the baseline capacity to be a "Jewish place." This not-insignificant

link to Jewish presence plays a pivotal role in Jewish identity in Coastal North County. Food is clearly a common denominator and connector for the participants in all the groups. One participant who works in the food distribution business stated, "I would quit my job now to run a Jewish deli in North County." This was received in the room with cheers. While food does not traditionally fall into the purview of this type of community planning, it cannot be overlooked in this case as it offers so many points of access to different segments of the Jewish population – from kashrut, to urban farming, to cooking and eating together. Both on and off of the Ecker Ranch, short-term and long-term, food is integral to the good life in San Diego County and should be part of programmatic "menu" in the future.

6. Transportation

Transportation and commuting figure highly in conversations about the quality of life in North County. While different factors affect each group (seniors prefer not to drive in the dark and parents deal with child chauffeuring), there was consensus that the distance and potential traffic en route to San Diego itself function as a barrier to participation in Jewish life for residents of North County. How far would they commute within North County? Most stated that the answer to this is more a function of the type of program and its relevance to their lives than the drive itself, if the drive is within reason. At a number of sessions, participants clearly stated that fifteen minutes is the comfortable driving time for them and their peers, and that exceeding this becomes a "schlep."

7. Interfaith Families

The 2003 demographic survey of Jewish San Diego found that nearly half of the Jewish residents of Coastal North County were part of an interfaith family, one of the highest rates in the United States. In the focus groups convened by the Leichtag Foundation, over 20% of the participants in the focus groups stated that they are members of interfaith families (either them, their parents or their children). The challenges faced by interfaith families as they navigate integration of Judaism into their lives along with the value that they bring to the community figured highly in the focus groups. For many, there is a clear need for inclusive programs with a low barrier to entry that would be welcoming to them, despite having little knowledge or background. Most state that they cannot find this in most Jewish institutions they have encountered. Across the interfaith families in the focus groups, there was tremendous diversity around the level and quality of engagement with organized Jewish life. Some told of uncomfortable social situations and lack of ease at entering synagogue life, including high cost, and ultimately chose the easier path of not formally associating with the community. Others have had a smoother path and have found their families to be accepted and welcomed. In all cases, people had positive and negative stories to tell, and it was clear that there was a deep and unmet need for inclusive atmosphere and programming.

8. Children and Teens

Among the subjects which arose most in the focus groups was programming for children and teens. Where current programs like Shalom Baby and preschools create social and

educational frameworks that involve both parents and young children, the challenges grow later on. There are limited programs for Jewish teens in Coastal North County, and according to program providers this is due to the chicken-and-egg cycle of limited funding available, and therefore limited staffing, and therefore limited outreach and programming for the teens. Among the ideas raised for teens were a more robust BBYO presence, other organized teen activities, a Jewish scouts program, upgraded summer camp opportunities and more.

9. Synagogue Life

There are relatively few synagogue options in Coastal North County. Most of the focus group participants stated that there are two primary options for synagogue life in North County – the Reform Temple Solel and the Orthodox Chabad Centers – and a conspicuous absence of a range of other options, including a synagogue that meets the needs of Conservative congregants. Some participants saw the synagogues as major providers for their Jewish needs in North County, while others felt alienated from synagogue life for a variety of reasons, many of which centered around the level of welcome or financial issues. Many participants mentioned that they would not find their home at either Reform or Orthodox synagogues and bemoaned the limited number of synagogue options in Coastal North County. Others, in all age groups, stated that their Jewish needs were more cultural and social, and that they would not seek heightened synagogue activity in Coastal North County.

For many, the solutions for their religious, ritual and spiritual needs will not be found at traditional synagogues but in alternative models which have begun to develop in the past decade across North America. These include non-denominational congregations or independent minyanim that have developed new models of affiliation and community membership. The need for clearly resonant values, smaller peer-based communities, and new type of “welcoming” attitude was repeated often in the focus groups as participants described a desire to meet around religious aspects of their lives but not through any of the models currently available in Coastal North County.

10. Multigenerational Activities

Another theme that was repeatedly raised in both discussions of infrastructure and activities was the concept of multigenerational engagements in a Jewish context. Similar to the replication of the town square, individuals in the majority of the focus groups seemed to crave intentional and unintentional meetings with individuals outside of their generation. For some, this was simply the happenstance meeting in the Jewish deli. For others, this was thinking specifically about activities that could bring the young and old (and all ages in between) together for discussion, study and community activities. In several groups, ideas surfaced about multigenerational ‘service’ activities where individuals of different ages could work together on a project in service of a community in need.

Closing Thoughts

For populations served by existing infrastructure (Hillel or Seacrest), the desire for change - and even the driving momentum for change - does not seem dire. For those in periods of life that crave the support and camaraderie of community but do not benefit from existing infrastructure to fill those needs, the desire for change is palpably greater. Many participants in these groups are eager to lend their time to efforts that will benefit them and create more community around them.

By convening these focus groups and exhibiting interest in the participants' lives, the Leichtag Foundation has already begun to instigate change in Jewish life in Coastal North County. This positive consequence necessitates that intentional thinking be given to ensure that momentum is not lost and that individuals continue to be engaged. As it works to further develop its strategic approach to Jewish life in Coastal North County, the Leichtag Foundation should continue to work with both the perspectives gathered through these focus groups and with the participants, many of whom were personally ignited by these conversations and by the potential of Jewish life in Coastal North County.