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Creativity by Critique:
The Unseen Force Behind Innovation

United Kingdom

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During the year I spent studying in Israel after I graduated from high school, I learned an organizational planning formula that consisted of three simple words: vision, critique, method. The formula maintained that any successful communal endeavor requires all three components: a clear and compelling idea of what ought to be, a sharp and engaging critique of what actually is, and a clear plan of how to get from the latter to the former. I have always found it clear, simple, and concise, and for that reason, I have returned to it time and again in my work.

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The notion of vision is essential in today's conversations about Jewish education and community development. The existential vision question (how *should* the Jewish world be?), as well as the organizational vision question (in what ways does my initiative establish an element of that ideal in reality?), have increasingly become part of normative Jewish educational discourse. Similarly, in the arena of method, certain things that focus on what to do and how to do it — analysis, discourse, and training, for example — are ubiquitous both within and beyond the Jewish world.

However, serious thinking seems to be lacking when it comes to the concept of critique. This is unfortunate, because critique may be the primary emotional driver of innovation. By critique, I do not simply mean objective analysis of the problem to be solved, but, more importantly, the subjective and affective experience of Jewish reality. The decision, for example, to create Limmud — the annual pluralist British Jewish educational conference — was inspired in part by a strong critique: shared feelings of frustration with the British Jewish establishment, the staid Jewish educational scene, and the lack of cross-communal dialogue and exchange.

Other more recent innovations in the United Kingdom similarly contain within them a powerful and motivating critique of supposed reality. Indeed Jewdas, an innovative and controversial Jewish cultural and educational organization that has become known for events like its "radical cosmopolitan yeshiva," "PunkPurim," and a film festival called "Treifspotting," wears its critique clearly on its sleeve. In many respects, its underlying motivation, and certainly its notoriety, come from its edgy and often subversive critique of the mainstream community establishment. Jewdas rejects community obsessions such as "defending the State of Israel and making Jewish babies," and draws its inspiration instead from the anarchist and socialist heritage of London's early-20th-century Jewish East End. Its leadership has even been arrested on occasion: Suffice it to say not everyone regards the distribution of tongue-in-cheek leaflets promoting the "Protocols of the Elders of Hackney" party at a major public communal event very funny.

Grassroots Jews is another, albeit far less controversial, example. A new spiritual and learning community that began, in part, because of a clear dissatisfaction with synagogue services on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, it has actively taken Judaism out of the synagogue and relocated it within informal spaces — people's homes, Bedouin tents, villas in Tuscany — and has replaced authoritarian and hierarchical models of leadership with far more democratic and collaborative ones. In so doing, it has been partly inspired by an acute critique of the community's assumptions about the meaning of belonging or affiliation, the neat denominational boxes that comprise its essential structure, and its existing funding models. And its efforts are yielding results: It is offering serious and compelling Judaism and is attracting some of the community's most passionate and dynamic young adults.

The jury is still out on the latest arrival on the innovation scene, NuMa, but again, the underlying critique is barely concealed beneath the activity. The organizational name says it all — NuMa comes from the Hebrew "Nu… Mah?" which can be loosely translated as "So… what are you going to do about it?!" NuMa's definition of the "it" is a distinct lack of creative passion in the community, and the organization exists to encourage new thinking and to build networks of people who might work together to instigate new initiatives. The people drawn to it tacitly or explicitly share a critique: The Jewish community is simply not sufficiently

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well set up to respond to the real problems and challenges that confront us.

The hypothesis emerging out of all three of these examples might be expressed thus: Behind every innovation, there is a stinging, convincing, heartfelt, and personal critique. This is not the same as objective analytical criticism. Intellectual analysis clearly differs from emotional critique, and in the context of understanding innovation, what may be really essential to understand is the psychological impact of negative experience. While intellectual objective criticism is certainly valuable, it is rarely associated directly with innovation. Anecdotally, it seems that many of the best innovators feel personally disappointed, aggrieved, angry, short-changed, or frustrated about something on a subjective level, and then channel that emotional energy into something that serves as a corrective.

There are other factors, of course, that will inspire individuals and groups to innovate: the desire to belong, the quest for power, the drive to succeed. But underlying it all may be the personal experience or narrative that generates passion for change. Understanding more about that may help us to identify at least one of the jigsaw puzzle pieces of effective innovation.

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British and Jewish

LISA CAPELOUTO

This autumn, the first book-length study of contemporary British Jewry, *Turbulent Times: The British Jewish Community Today*, will be published. It examines the changing nature of the British Jewish community and its leadership since 1990.

Its authors, Keith Kahn-Harris and Ben Gidley, contend that there has been a shift within Jewish communal discourse from a strategy of security, which emphasized Anglo-Jewry's sense of security as Jewish British citizens, to a strategy of insecurity, which emphasizes the dangers and threats Jews face individually and communally. As the community became increasingly insecure, it stressed a greater emphasis on Jewish education and practice. This shift also had an impact on renewing and strengthening cultural resources — contributing to a Jewish "renaissance" in Britain. Though I've witnessed this vibrancy over the past 20 years, I sense it is more a product of developing an outward-looking identity and confidence than a reaction to insecurity.

I direct JHub (www.jhub.org.uk), a program of the Pears Foundation, which supports innovative social action organizations — initiatives dedicated to service, development, children with learning disabilities, human rights, and minorities in Israel. We work in partnership with (the original) Limmud, Moishe House London, and the soon-to-be-built Jewish Community Centre for London. We've also supported (along with others) the launch of a community-wide environmental and fair-trade campaign (www.biggreenjewish.org).

Personally, my family and I belong to a Modern Orthodox community in Brondesbury, North West London, which has grown over the past five years from a dying congregation of 20 or so families to its current roster of 150 families. Our children attend a local (state-funded) Jewish primary school. There are now more than 20 such schools in London alone — a number that has doubled since the early 1990s. The increase in demand for places in Jewish schools has caused controversy and division within the community and a recent case even reached the Supreme Court. The result of that case is that acceptance into Jewish school is now offered on the basis of Jewish practice rather than being linked to whether or not a child is born to a Jewish mother. Schools are encouraged to be more outward looking, and our school is twinned with both Christian and Muslim schools in our area, providing the children with opportunities to learn with and about other faith groups.

Our communal renaissance can be seen in the choices of activities: for example, one evening last week I had to choose between attending a kosher fair-trade coffee-tasting event, attending a concert by rapper Ephryme in one of the oldest synagogues in Britain, or visiting Jewish Book Week 2010 and hearing authors Jonathan Safran Foer and Etgar Keret debate the ethics of eating meat.

The Jewish Chronicle, the "voice" of British Jewry, publishes weekly headlines indicating that antisemitism and campus clashes about Israel are on the increase. While this news challenges and worries us, our Jewish lives continue to grow richer and more varied. British Jews just might be the most integrated minority in a very multicultural Britain.

Lisa Capelouto grew up in Cape Town, South Africa, and now lives in her adopted city of London with her husband, Paul, and their children, Adam (9) and Ana (6).