



**Emerging
Jewish
Leadership
Incubator**

Exploratory Impact Evaluation

Tobin Belzer PhD

January 2023

Table of Contents

Background	1
Methods	2
Interview Participants	3
Findings	4
1. Enriched Practices	5
2. Gained Skills	6
3. Strengthened Relationships	7
4. Expanded Awareness	8
5. Empowered Leaderships	9
6. Continued Commitment	10
7. Affected Lives	11
Opportunities	12
Concluding Thoughts	13



Background

As longtime residents of Chinook Illahee/Portland Oregon's east side, the three founders of TischPDX – Rabbi Ariel Stone, Kalyn Culler Cohen and Eleyna Fugman – were aware of a growing cadre of visionary Jewish young adults from marginalized communities who were cultivating communities for themselves outside of Jewish institutions. To serve and support these entrepreneurial individuals' Jewish community-building, they created TischPDX: Emerging Jewish Leadership Incubator.

TischPDX helps young leaders to harness their skill and creativity to bring more people to the table of Jewish life (*tisch* means table in Yiddish). Since it launched in August 2018, a total of 22 “Tischies” have participated in four cohorts of TischPDX, and a fifth cohort is currently underway.

The Incubator is a 10-month program with an option to extend the experience to 18 months, (which almost everyone has chosen). Participants meet monthly for 4-hour sessions to engage in cohort-based peer support, mentoring and skill-building within a framework of anti-oppression theory and practice. The Jewish educational components of the Incubator include Torah study, an exploration of Jewish yearly cycles, and practice leading rituals. Participants also receive ongoing mentorship, networking opportunities, and a stipend.

Individuals who have already demonstrated the commitment and ability to create and implement new and innovative secular or spiritual Jewish programs on Portland's east side are invited to apply. The program focuses on supporting “Tischies” who have been structurally and socially marginalized in mainstream Jewish communal organizations, including: queer and trans Jews, those raised secular, and those from mixed families and heritages. In year two, TischPDX leaders began strategizing about how to better support the efforts of BIJOCSM (Black, Indigenous, non-Black Jews of Color, Sephardim, and Mizrahim) Jewish young adults.

TischPDX has received national support and recognition. In 2020, the Incubator was selected to take part in Upstart's National Entrepreneurial Sprint Cohort, which provides immersive training and support to enable early-stage startups to test and iterate new initiatives. In 2021, TischPDX was included in Slingshot's annual “10 to Watch” list, which highlights up-and-coming organizations and projects across North America that are responding to current and timely needs in the Jewish community and beyond.



Methods

This longitudinal exploratory outcomes-based evaluation was designed to surface Tischies' perceptions of how their involvement has affected their thinking and actions over time. The study began with a review of programmatic documents to provide context and inform the design of the research instruments. For this purpose, I also interviewed four organizational leaders: Rabbi Ariel Stone, Co-Founder and Spiritual Leader; Eleyna Fugman, Co-Founder and Executive Director; Kalyn Culler Cohen, Co-Founder and Board Member; and Derekh Travers, Co-Director.

Data was then collected using in-depth interviews with members of the first three cohorts of TischPDX. I used a retrospective methodology to examine Tischies' perceptions of attitudinal, behavioral, and intellectual changes related to their participation.² Data was analyzed using a combination of emergent coding (where codes are derived from themes that surface inductively from the text) and a priori coding (in which select codes are articulated beforehand). Outlying responses were also investigated. This method firmly grounded the insights derived from the data in the perspectives of the research participants.

The findings are presented based on outcome-oriented themes that emerged through the process of qualitative data analysis. While data collection also surfaced Tischies' perspectives about their Incubator experience – including benefits, challenges, and suggestions – those data are beyond the scope of the current evaluation, which is focused on outcomes related to participation.

Throughout the report, the quotes included were chosen to represent a variety of perspectives and a balance of voices. Every interview participant was quoted at least once. Quotes were edited for readability.

These findings reflect the perspectives of 88% of the population: all but 2 of the 17 members of the first three cohorts were available to be interviewed. Five respondents from each cohort participated



²In the retrospective post-then-pre design, both before and after information are collected at the same time. This technique is less intrusive and avoids pretest sensitivity and response shift bias that can result from overestimation or underestimation. Pratt, C. C., McGuigan, W. M., & Katzev, A. R. (2000) "Measuring program outcomes: Using retrospective pretest methodology." American Journal of Evaluation, 21(3). 341-349.



Interview Participants

Tischies' relationships with Portland vary. A minority grew up in Portland. Many more are transplants: some have lived in Portland for more than ten years, and others are newer to the city. They moved from Florida, New Jersey, California, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, Missouri and Israel. Some have previously lived in urban centers with much larger Jewish populations and others came from rural areas with few Jews. Research participants were drawn to Portland for a wide variety of reasons; they came for work and school, followed friends and moved with loved ones. Several came because they were drawn to the distinctive character of Portland.

Their Jewish backgrounds varied considerably. For a few, TischPDX was a step on a Jewish path that started when they were children. Most had little previous Jewish educational experience or communal involvement growing up.

By design, Tischies all had previous Jewish leadership experience. Some were very connected to Jewish life in PDX. Prior to participating, many had been creating and taking part in informal Jewish community and grassroots Jewish organizing for several years. Some were loosely connected to local congregations and had volunteered for Bend the Arc, Moishe House, and SURJ Jews. Many had longstanding relationships with members of the TischPDX leadership team.

Demographic Characteristics

- Almost every Tischie who was interviewed (14 of 15) identified as white or white presenting. Of those, 13 are Ashkenazi, including four who have one Jewish parent. The other white interview participant converted to Judaism. One interview participant is a Black Jew.
- Two-thirds of interview participants (10 of 15) are cis-women/female. The other four identify as gender queer, non-binary, trans, and/or gender non-conforming.
- Their self-identification related to sexual orientation was highly individualized. They are: queer (8); queer and gay or lesbian (2); a dyke (1); a lesbian (1); and “mostly straight and also queer” (2). One interview respondent preferred not to specify.
- When asked if they identify as disabled or living with a disability, three interview participants said yes and one said maybe. Another three said they have “mental health issues,” one identified as neuro-divergent and one said they live with a chronic illness. One interview respondent preferred not to specify.
- Eight interview respondents said their income in the last year was above Portland's median per capita income of \$37,000 and seven said their income was below that median.
- Twelve interview participants said they have access to generational wealth and three do not.



Findings

The following pages illustrate the many ways that TischPDX is equipping and supporting participants to continue to proactively create community for themselves and others. Interview participants described several types of outcomes they experienced as a result of their participation in TischPDX. They gained and honed valuable facilitation and community building skills that made them feel more competent and confident as Jews and as Jewish leaders. The cohort experience engendered meaningful relationships that have continued. The educational component and the opportunity to learn from one another influenced Tischies' perspectives and expanded their awareness of complex social issues.

TischPDX robustly fortified participants' Jewish trajectories and made a substantial contribution to the unfolding story of their Jewish lives. Tischies emerged from the experience as more empowered and committed Jewish leaders.

Of course, the extent to which every Tischie experienced each articulated outcome varied. Yet

across the three cohorts, every research participant articulated more than one positive outcome.

Every interview participant valued the opportunity to participate and expressed gratitude for the experience. They thoughtfully described how their perceptions of the various components of TischPDX were shaped by their positive and negative previous educational, Jewish, and leadership development experiences. Some, who were newer to facilitating and organizing, especially benefited from that component of the Incubator. The Jewish educational components were more powerful for some than for others. The relationships some developed were hugely consequential. Others, who came to the experience with already substantial connections, appreciated the opportunity to deepen those relationships. Every Tischie shared how they have applied something they learned or gained since they participated. Many offered practical suggestions about how to enhance the experience for future cohorts.

1. Enriched Practices

TischPDX enabled participants to feel more competent and confident engaging Jewishly. Many described how TischPDX decreased their previous experience of not feeling “Jewish enough” because of their lack of prior Jewish experiences and education.

Participating enriched and influenced Tischies’ observance of rituals and traditions. Several interview participants described how TischPDX sparked their sense of connection to the Jewish calendar and added depth to their understanding of holidays. Tischies shared how they learned about counting the Omer, Shavuot, and Sukkot for the first time, and now count those among their favorite holidays. Others mentioned how participating in TischPDX made their observance of Shabbat and Rosh Chodesh more meaningful.

TischPDX sparked some interview participants’ love of Jewish learning. A few have continued to study Torah locally with some regularity, and others have participated in Jewish learning online with SVARA: A Traditionally Radical Yeshiva and the Jewish Theological Seminary.

“ I had low confidence about doing Jewish rituals because I didn’t know how it was supposed to be done. I realized we are all figuring it out. I built a lot of foundational knowledge through Tisch: I learned more about the Jewish calendar and holidays.

“ Being part of Tisch gave me confidence to be proud of who I am. I don’t feel less than any more. It made me feel very valued as a queer Jewish human in every aspect of myself. It taught me that I no longer want to be without Jewish community. I now recognize how important that is to my personal wellbeing. Everything is better when I take time to honor Shabbat in community. It taught me how I want to create my own Jewish family with my own children. I created that for myself with Tisch, so I can do it for my future kids.

“ I started wearing a kippah during Tisch. Making my Jewishness visible in a city where there aren’t a lot of Jews around felt brave in the same way that identifying as queer does.

“ I learned how good it can feel to live by the Jewish rhythms and to be connected to other Jews and ancestors. Tisch taught me that living by the Jewish calendar takes effort but it’s valuable.

“ I know Torah study is a place I can go now to access comfort and enrichment. I have a trusted community I can rely on that was enhanced by Tisch.



2. Gained Skills

Research participants valued the opportunity to gain and hone skills that enriched their community-building efforts. They described how their processes of creating programming benefited from the deadlines, structure and accountability TischPDX provided. One explained: **“Tisch had a motivating effect when I really needed to get a project off the ground and it provided me with the structure to weave myself into community.”** Another said: **“Joining Tisch gave me the feeling that someone is rooting for me and that enabled me to feel like I could lead programs and keep going over time.”**

Tischies described how they learned to plan and facilitate programs more effectively. They acquired tangible facilitation skills and tools, which they have continued to use. **“I learned a lot from Derekh about setting expectations, creating opportunities for more people to participate, and helping conversations flow,”** a Tischie explained. Another interview participant, who had many years of experience implementing programs, said they particularly valued the opportunity to observe others, explaining:

I got to see things done in different ways than I do them. By being adjacent I learned about how non-profits work.

Several mentioned how TischPDX expanded their thinking about accessibility and influenced them to more proactively ask about, and address, their community members' needs.

Interview participants mentioned benefiting from Eleyna and Derekh's explicit input as well as by observing the co-directors in action. The guidance they received influenced how Tischies approached their community-building. One shared, **“I learned so much from watching Derekh and Eleyna facilitate: they know how to open up a conversation and also shut it down.”** Another described how Eleyna directly influenced their approach to community building, explaining:

I had a very specific idea of how I wanted my community to develop, but Eleyna told me to start with a seed of intention and other humans, and let magic happen instead of forcing my vision. My community looks totally different than I expected (in a good way) because I took her advice.”

Tischies appreciated how Eleyna influenced them to take time for relationship building and focus on **“a person-centered model of planning.”**

Two interview participants said they anticipated professional benefits from their learning. They noted how the leadership training gave them marketable skills they expect will enhance their resumes. Others mentioned how they gained valuable professional connections and have received additional job opportunities because of TischPDX. One Tischie shared how the experience showed them the limitations of their own facilitation skills, but gave them access to excellent facilitators. Others said the experience gave them perspective about skills they already have.



3. Strengthened Relationships

During the Incubator, Tischies shared their perspectives, discussed challenges, offered one another feedback and shared suggestions. Interview participants described how the experience of learning from and supporting one another enhanced their relationships. They have ongoing relationships with Tischies within and across cohorts and consider themselves part of the TischPDX network. They mentioned inviting one another to events and are included on each other's listservs. The opportunity to collaborate supported Tischies to continue to create programming.

For some, the TischPDX network has become respondents' primary Jewish community. Several Tischies have joined the TischPDX board and supported the Incubator as employees and consultants.

“ Tisch provided a Jewish community for me. There was some clout to be chosen and that gave me confidence. It gave me more connection to people and my network expanded. It gave me a sense of Jewish home.

“ I made lifelong connections to people in my cohort. The more connected I am to other Jews, the more I can do in and out of Jewish community because I have that grounding and support.

“ One of the most meaningful parts was being with people I met who are now my friends. I've stayed in touch with people and we still collaborate on programming. Tisch also deepened my relationship with Rabbi Stone and made me feel connected to Shir Tikvah.

“ After being in Tisch, I felt all in. Being part of the community helped me feel closer to the budding organization and made me want to show my face more. There are so many people creating things and I wanted to integrate that into my life. About 30% of the people from my cohort are still in my circle of Jewish friends and I'm close with people from subsequent cohorts.

“ I love doing ritual creation so I intentionally made myself available to support other Tischies to bring Jewish stuff to their programming.



4. Expanded Awareness

The Incubator provided the opportunity for Tischies to have more nuanced conversations about complex social issues like: positionality; intersectionality; anti-Semitism; race and class privilege; Zionism and anti-Zionism, and white supremacy. An interview participant shared:

In Tisch, we studied about what it means to be an ally and feel a sense of shared humanity. I gained a deeper understanding of how I, as a Jewish person, can show up for others in a way that doesn't harm them. We learned about how to avoid harm by studying how Jews are harmed. Through Tisch, I was encouraged to do the deep dive and I learned how to evaluate my own morals and values. It was a safe space to do a lot of hard reflecting.

Another described how they learned to investigate and challenge their assumptions. Still another said the experience helped them come to terms with identifying as disabled by creating a space where they felt comfortable naming that identity.

Eleya and Derekh's facilitation supported Tischies to bring their full selves to the experience. An interview participant explained:

The environment they created was deeply attentive to the energy people were bringing and they were open to input. I could really be there without worrying about how I was coming across.

Learning as a cohort expanded Tischies' understanding of the variety of their Jewish experiences. They specifically mentioned learning more about the experiences of: being a Jew by Choice, a Black Jew, and growing up Jewish in a small town. A Tischie reflected:

People had their own lens onto Judaism. Seeing how differently the Jewish content landed for people was helpful. Things work well for some people that don't work for others.

Participating also expanded interview participants' awareness of the broader landscape of Jewish life in Portland, motivated them to get more involved, and increased their sense of belonging to Jewish community. Since participating, some Tischies shared how they have learned more about Portland's mainstream Jewish organizational landscape, including: the Jewish Federation of Greater Portland, Chabad, the Mittleman Jewish Community Center, and various congregations. Some have begun or increased their participation in synagogue life. As TischPDX alumni, they described feeling a sense of entitled connection to the Eastside Jewish Commons. Some described how TischPDX also expanded their awareness of organizations outside of Portland.



5. Empowered Leadership

TischPDX enabled participants to feel more empowered as Jewish leaders. Tischies gained confidence in their abilities to create positive Jewish experiences for themselves and others. The experience amplified the importance of Jewish rituals and community in Tischies' lives. Participating helped some draw more definitive connections between their Jewish identities and their social justice work.

“When I started Tisch, I was already thinking of myself as someone who gathers community, puts on events and has some knowledge and excitement about Jewish community, I wasn't thinking of myself as a Jewish leader and I wasn't thinking of my ritual leading skills as valuable. Tisch helped solidify/reinforce that my Jewish community building is valuable and part of the larger project of justice work.

“Tisch was good for my belief in myself around my leadership capacity. Understanding that my work was worthy of that support was powerful.

“Tisch made me less afraid to put myself out there. Before, I didn't feel like I had clarity about who I wanted to be in Jewish spaces. I like holding space to bring in Jewish practices: I really appreciate how the themes and rituals translate to today and provide an ancestral connection.

“Tisch gave me more confidence to lead prayers. Seeing my friends do that made me realize it was something I wanted to do. I learned by watching and being in the group, which allowed me to let go of some of my feelings of inadequacy. Also, there were others in my cohort with the same upbringing, which normalized my experience.

“I feel empowered and encouraged to show up Jewishly in social justice spaces. Tisch reinforced the notion that the two are deeply connected.

“I injected more about disability justice into my job. People at my work are grateful for my attention to their needs.



6. Continued Commitment

Following their cohort experience, research participants described the many ways they continue to cultivate Jewish experiences for themselves and their communities. Several research participants described how TischPDX motivated them seek out additional opportunities for leadership development. They have participated in teacher trainings, received grant funding from other organizations, and have continued to study Torah. Two Tischies, who subsequently moved away from Portland, have continued to foster Jewish community in their new locales.

Some have pursued ongoing involvement with local and national Jewish organizations. One Tischie participated in the Keshet Fellowship, a cohort-based experience for young progressive Jews offered by Aleph: the Alliance for Jewish Renewal. Another took part in a yearlong teaching Fellowship in Israel. Others are more involved with local congregations. A few are working for Jewish organizations as consultants and employees.

Tischies have also supported the work of other Jewish organizations with their community building. They have received funding to support their programming from OneTable, Moishe House Without Walls, and Upstart. One interview participant helped others create micro-communities as a volunteer coach for At The Well. Another connected others to SVARA: A Traditionally Radical Yeshiva and Pardes: Institute of Jewish Studies.

“Tisch pushed me to be comfortable creating and holding Jewish spaces. It gave me structure and language to think about who I want to be Jewishly and empowered me to think about what I want to do. There’s a solidness to my commitment to holding space and I’m pursuing that professionally.”

“Tisch led me to experiences that have shaped me as a human. I realized how much having a queer Jewish community supports my mental health. I love building Jewish community for folks on the margins. I love collecting folks and showing them being Jewish doesn’t have to be like they learned. I love bringing them back to ritual to help them feel better in their body and giving them the power to know it can be different. It can be for them.”

“After I moved, I connected with a group of queer Jews. I’ve been organizing and hosting shabbat dinners. I’m hungering for Jewish community and ritual here, so I need to make it happen.”



7. Affected Lives

When asked, every fellow shared a story of how their efforts moved people who participated in their programming.

After I lit the candles with *kavannah* (intention) at an event, someone came up to me and thanked me for creating the first queer Jewish experience they ever had.

I hung out with a woman at an event who told me she was thinking about converting to Judaism. She said that she came to the practice, but hadn't felt the Divine within her until that event. After that, she knew she could convert.

After attending one of my events, a friend told me their 15-year-old said they: 'want to be Jewish like that.' Other people have said the only Jewish thing people do is with me.

I just had a couple of people come up to me at an event and were really appreciative of the work I was doing organizing and connecting people.

After my educational program, some folks got a lot more interested in Jewish study, and I connected them with places to learn online.

Making Jewish moments for people is the best feeling. For a lot of people, the things I do provide their sole connection to Judaism. After an event, we were washing dishes and someone told me this is their only connection to Jewish community. Another person said they haven't been connected in awhile and didn't know being Jewish could be like this.



Concluding Thoughts

This exploratory outcomes evaluation illustrates the numerous ways TischPDX has affected positive changes in participants' thinking and actions, which has enriched people's lives and strengthened their Jewish communities. Tischies shared their perceptions of how their participation has helped them develop their capabilities and contributed to their evolution as Jewish leaders. The Incubator supported them to self-reflect and gain confidence. Tischies have developed and deepened substantive and influential relationships with one another and with TischPDX leaders. They continue to apply their learning and have grown their connections to

people and opportunities from the local and national Jewish communal sectors. Years after they participated, Tischies feel a strong sense of connection to the TischPDX network and are invested in continuing to contribute to their Jewish communities.

These positive outcomes demonstrate how TischPDX has successfully supported a cadre of Jewish young adults to further actualize a dynamic and creative Jewish community. In doing so, TischPDX has contributed to the vibrancy of the local and national Jewish ecosystem.