

Jewish Gap-Year Program Opens in Portland

Tivnu Teaches Construction and Talmud — Alternative to Israel

By Chavie Lieber
August 20, 2013



There are few, if any, options for teens in America who want a Jewish experience during their post-high school, pre-college gap year, but don't want to spend time in Israel.

That was a key incentive for Portland, Ore.-based contracting carpenter Steve Eisenbach-Budner to create Tivnu, the first Jewish social-justice themed gap-year program in the U.S., which starts August 2014.

"Spending time in Israel is an important piece of Jewish identity for many, but not every kid wants to go to Israel at that point in their lives — or maybe their parents aren't comfortable with it," Eisenbach-Budner said. "The fact is, most of us will choose to live in the U.S., and if we are going to figure out our identity as Jews in social justice, America is the place to do the work."

Some teenagers take a year off after high school, before they dive into a serious college curriculum. But Tivnu is not your average Jewish gap-year program. Similar to AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps — which is geared toward the post-college demographic — and inspired by Eisenbach-Budner's experience working as a carpenter with social justice groups in Portland, the program facilitates Jewish learning through affordable housing construction.

Tivnu participants will explore the many aspects of construction, from learning how to use a saw table to reading architectural blue prints. Its curriculum will use Jewish texts and history to analyze social justice and communal obligation within Jewish tradition. Participants will also hold internships at advocacy groups that focus on human rights and housing.

Eisenbach-Budner was moved to start Tivnu based on his own experience growing up in a low-income housing unit in New York City, where his parents were both teachers. He first launched Tivnu in a modified form in 2011 with weeklong and eventually daylong sessions. Nine months ago, he was awarded \$100,000 as part of a Joshua Venture Fellowship, and began his plans for expanding Tivnu into a gap-year program. Tivnu's 2014 program hopes to draw 15 participants.

The nine-month program will cost \$26,000, which is similar in cost to other gap-year programs. The price will include room and board, and Eisenbach-Budner is currently working with a local Portland university to have the program accredited. The environment will be Shabbat-and kosher-friendly, although the organization is not associated with any specific denomination. The participants, Eisenbach-Budner said, "are treated as young adults." They will live in Portland housing with a resident assistant and will cook for themselves.

Tivnu's board of directors is currently working on the gap-year curriculum. Board member and former Yale English professor William Deresiewicz is helping Eisenbach-Budner develop the educational programming. He said the texts will cover significant ground, from Rambam to poetry written about Jews working in the Lower East Side sweatshops during the 1900s. "We'll be using Jewish texts to look at core issues. [The program] won't just be about labor, but the meaning of it all. The texts will help [participants to] understand questions of communal responsibility that Jews have thought about since the beginning," Deresiewicz said.

Deresiewicz added that the textual learning will also focus on the various eras of Jewish history in which groups performed similar work to that of Tivnu participants, such as the kibbutz movement and the labor and social utopianism movements. Eisenbach-Budner said that the program is looking for participants who think outside the box and are seeking for a challenge. "The program is for kids who want to work with their hands, and want to contribute to society in a way that doesn't involve sitting in the office," said Eisenbach-Budner. "Kids in our program will not be afraid to get dirty, and want to expand their physical capabilities."

Tamar Palgon, a 17-year-old Tivnu summer participant from Teaneck, N.J., said she is strongly considering Tivnu's gap-year program. Palgon spent her Tivnu summer building makeshift outdoor libraries for the public and planting gardens in backyards. She said the planting and carpentry were challenging, but Tivnu leaders worked with the participants at their levels.

"I've never done this type of volunteer work before, and the labor is hard, but I'm really enjoying it," she said. "I'm learning about permaculture, giving back to the land and spreading resources as much as possible. It's a great culture here and I can tell these people are really ready to make a change."

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