



**URJ BIENNIAL 2017**

DECEMBER 6-10 • BOSTON, MA

UNION *for* REFORM JUDAISM

## Vice President of Youth Miriam T. Chilton, Address to the URJ Biennial 2017

*This address was presented before the [74th Union for Reform Judaism Biennial convention](#) on Thursday, December 7.*

Thank you to Adam and Alyson, [who spoke before me here tonight]. These are the amazing participants and young alumni who make up our tribe of movers and shakers – movers and shakers who act and change the world around them.

I love these stories. To me, they show resiliency. Action. Compassion.

Our work embodies what Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said: “Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy.”

Yes, we *are* doing holy work. We are imparting Jewish wisdom and knowledge. We are intentionally fostering a generation that is: resilient, responsible, compassionate, joyful, and Jewish.

Enthusiastically Jewish.

What is it that we do that creates this tribe of active, engaged young people?

We amplify compassion in the face of adversity.

As Hurricane Harvey destroyed thousands of homes, [URJ Greene Family Camp](#) knew it needed to help. Within hours they moved camp from Bruceville, TX, to Houston and created a pop-up day camp in partnership with Congregational Emanu-El and the local JCC.

With the help of hundreds of volunteers, 300 kids had a vibrant, fun-filled place that offered hope and care to them and their families amidst horrendous devastation. Working together, we showed the best of what we do as a movement.

You have already seen a preview of our new research. You have seen that engagement in youth programs works, and it works for lifetime.

What is it that we do? We build connection and community.

After wildfires destroyed [URJ Camp Newman](#) property, we saw, and we lived, what it means to be part of a tribe, a community, a movement. [As Daryl Messinger reflected this morning](#), we saw how Camp Newman was more than a physical space.

It came to represent every camper, every conclave, every walk in the woods, every wish for a bright and promising future.

And just three weeks after the fires, thanks to the 2,000 donors, scores of community leaders and our dedicated professionals, we opened registration for [Camp Newman by the Bay](#) for summer 2018.

We did this together.

When we are all in, we win.

What is it that we do? We cultivate resiliency and understanding.

As *13 Reasons Why*, catapulted teen suicide and mental health issues to the national conversation, many were left asking how do we better support our youth? Within 48 hours, URJ Youth, ARJE, and HUC partnered to train 300 adults who work with youth. We developed resources that spurred congregations and other organizations to create parent programs, share newsletters and bring in additional mental health support.

Yes, we do this sacred work to empower and support young people in their search for meaning and purpose on their own terms.

No one else could have responded that quickly, we are securing our children's future. When we are all in, we win.

What is it that we do? We inspire and innovate across the continent.

What does that look like? It looks like a budding scientist or athlete at one of our specialty camps.

It looks like a camp community, dressed in white, singing and dancing and celebrating Shabbat.

It looks like thousands of NFTYites engaged in social justice work.

Innovation and inspiration is happening across the Movement. Take the opportunity to learn about the experiments and creative programming happening in each other's congregations.

When we are all in, we win.

By working and creating together, engagement has surged by 20% over the past four years.

And growth will continue well into next summer as we open our newest camps: URJ Six Points Creative Arts and URJ Six Points Sci-Tech West!

Yes, we are offering more specialty camps.

We are expanding NFTY.

We are launching innovative programs and celebrating incredible investments such as the \$5 million gift to [URJ Heller High](#).

In 2017 alone, 21,000 youth, teens, and young adults participated in immersive URJ youth programs, complementing the tens of thousands you reach with congregational programming.

Twenty-one thousand is a huge number; it's about four times the number of people in this room. But here's the thing.

Twenty-one thousand is only 10% of those who could be participating in our programs. What would the Jewish future look like if 21,000 grew to 200,000.

Two hundred thousand lives shaped by the Reform Movement! That would be a blindingly bright Jewish future.

Would you be excited to live in that world?

That is the world we are here to grow and cultivate.

So, let's partner to give more youth the gift of a vibrant Judaism, one that resonates for them.

Go home and find the kid who is poised to be a political activist or breakthrough scientist – or perhaps the one finding their voice as an artist or actor.

Find the young child who desperately needs to disconnect to learn what they are truly capable of. You have the power, and what I believe is an obligation, to give this unparalleled opportunity to our youth.

Encourage them to attend a NFTY event, summer program, or a trip to Israel. It will inspire them to become the person they were meant to be.

We will not get to 200,000 overnight, or by next year. But increasing engagement by more than 10% is well within our reach.

Your investment and commitment will deliver the win for our young people and the Reform Movement – and I, for one, can't wait to meet all the new movers and shakers.