Voices from the Field: CANVAS Summit & Navigating the Future of Jewish Arts and Culture

This month, CANVAS brought together leaders from across the Jewish arts and culture field for its invitation-only **2026 Jewish Arts and Culture Summit** in Detroit. I had the privilege of joining this remarkable group on behalf of CAJM, alongside two of our board members, **Flo Low, CEO of BAMAH**, and **Laura Mandel, Managing Director of Program Strategy and Impact at the Vilna.**



For those unfamiliar with CANVAS, it is a funding and field-building collaborative dedicated to supporting and amplifying the 21st-century Jewish Cultural Renaissance. CANVAS has supported CAJM through its grantmaking program: Network & Emerging Networks.

CANVAS brings together major philanthropic partners committed to Jewish arts and culture across North America. By pooling their resources, these funders can do more than simply increase their giving. They can think strategically about how to strengthen an entire field, identify shared needs, and invest in the networks and infrastructure that allow Jewish cultural life to flourish.



But CANVAS takes this work a step further, and in a way that feels almost radical within the funding world.

CANVAS convenes funders and grantees for three days of shared learning and conversation, creating a rare opportunity for the people helping to sustain Jewish cultural life to sit face-to-face with those doing the work of creating it. Rather than gathering around pitches, proposals, or funding requests, we come together as colleagues, thinkers, and partners, with the opportunity to ask difficult questions, share ideas, and imagine what might be possible.

I knew going into these three days that the experience would be meaningful. It was only upon leaving that I fully understood the gift we had been given.

To represent CAJM and our membership in conversations with leaders from major Jewish philanthropies, alongside executives of networks that mirror our own, examples include the Alliance for Jewish Theatre, Jewish Book Council, and Reboot, was an extraordinary opportunity. We also shared space with leaders of some of the most exciting Jewish cultural projects of today, including Havurah, Ayin Press, and The Workshop. It was especially wonderful to connect with **Rabbi Kendell Pinkney, Director of Education and Artist-in-Residence at Reboot, Founding Artistic Director of The Workshop, and a member of CAJM's Advisory Committee.**



One of the most innovative aspects of the CANVAS Summit was its use of Open Space Technology (OST), a facilitation model developed by Harrison Owen in 1985.

Rather than arriving with a fully planned agenda of panels and presentations, participants create the agenda together. Anyone can propose a topic, question, or conversation they believe deserves attention. Those ideas are placed on a shared board, and participants choose where to spend their time. Looking at the OST board, I was struck by how familiar so many of these conversations felt. In these fragile times, there was something deeply reassuring about discovering how much common ground we share.

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Our CAJM board members beautifully captured the spirit of the gathering.
Flo Low, CEO of BAMAH, reflected:

"***I came away from CANVAS reminded of how much is possible when we make time to think together, ask honest questions, and learn from one another. Sometimes, in Jewish spaces or arts spaces, I feel like I have to leave a piece of my identity at the door. It was incredible to be in a community where I could bring all of myself, with colleagues who share a deep commitment to Jewish life, to the arts, and to creating connections through Jewish art. I left energized by the incredible possibility and creativity in our community.***"

Laura Mandel, Managing Director of Program Strategy and Impact at The Vilna Shul, shared:

"***Having space to think and be with such thoughtful colleagues and friends was a gift, a unique opportunity to consider the issues that we all face, and to brainstorm as a community what we can do to create a vibrant Jewish future. I leave with an appreciation for our creative community, and with renewed enthusiasm to explore ways that collaboration can strengthen and fortify us all***."



Both reflections speak to something I have been thinking about throughout this month. We spend so much time focused on the work of our individual institutions that it can be easy to lose sight of the larger ecosystem we belong to. Having the space to step outside our daily work, think together, and explore ideas without the pressure of an immediate deliverable is itself an investment in our collective future.

At the opening of the Summit, CANVAS acknowledged what feels like a turning of the tide. It is a fragile but hopeful shift, one in which resilience and a renewed sense of possibility are beginning to emerge.

Lou Cove, founder and president of CANVAS, shared recent research that offers important insights into the role culture plays in the lives of Jewish young adults. He pointed us to his recent article, ***Data for Your Kishkes: Project Prism Confirms Jewish Culture Is Key Driver of Purpose & Identity***, published by the Jim Joseph Foundation, in which he writes:

"***Now, the Jim Joseph Foundation's Project Prism research on Jewish young adults provides the data to support what our kishkes have been telling us all along: for Jewish young adults, culture is a leading source of purpose, second only to family.***"

Cove goes on to explain that while Pew's 2021 report helped document how many Jewish Americans participate in cultural activities, Project Prism helps us understand what younger adults gain from those experiences and why culture and belonging matter so deeply.

The research identifies two groups for whom culture is a particularly important entry point into Jewish life: the 29% described as "Culturally Connected" and the 22% identified as "Dipping In." Together, these groups represent 51% of Jewish young adults surveyed, with engagement shaped by experiences ranging from art, music, and literature to food, holidays, and everyday traditions.

These findings offer an important perspective on the value of our work. Culture is not simply an additional way to engage with Jewish life. For many young adults, it is one of the primary ways they find meaning, connection, and belonging.

Against the backdrop of rising antisemitism and profound changes in Jewish communal life, this research provides both encouragement and a challenge. Jewish arts and culture are not peripheral to the future of Jewish life. They are helping shape how the next generation understands itself, finds community, and creates meaning.

For those of us working in museums, this is a powerful reminder of the role our institutions can play, not only in preserving Jewish history, but in helping people imagine and participate in a vibrant Jewish future.

One of the ideas that stayed with me most came from a passage shared during the Summit from Douglas Rushkoff's *Nothing Sacred: The Truth About Judaism*.

Rushkoff offers the image of a cartographer and a surfer, two people who both know the ocean intimately but understand it in very different ways.

The cartographer seeks to map the landscape, establish boundaries, and make the unknown navigable. The surfer lives in the movement of the ocean, reading the wind, the weather, and the shifting tides, responding to what comes next.

We were asked to consider which one we might be.

Some people knew immediately. Others saw themselves in both roles or questioned whether the two could really be separated.

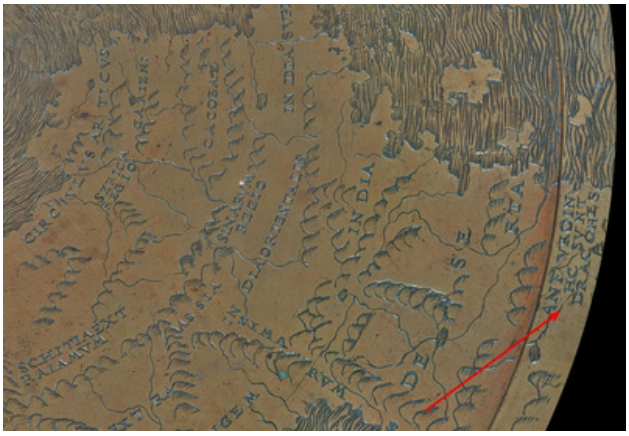
I found myself thinking about one of my favorite bits of cartographic history: the dragons and sea creatures that appear on medieval and early modern maps.

Jewish cartographers were part of this rich tradition of mapping the known and unknown world. Later Hebrew maps included their own depictions of extraordinary creatures, including the great fish that swallowed Jonah.

On the early 16th-century Hunt-Lenox Globe, we even find the Latin inscription *Hic sunt dracones*, or "Here be dragons."

I have always loved this image. These cartographers were working with a limited understanding of their world, acknowledging that beyond what they knew lay places and possibilities they could not yet fully comprehend.

The dragons might be dangerous. Or perhaps they were simply creatures not yet understood. Only by venturing beyond the familiar could anyone discover what was really there.



A detailed look at the Hunt-Lenox Globe which one of only two maps or globes that actually contain the Latin phrase, “Here be dragons.” Image: NYPL.



1695 map of the Holy Land by Abraham Bar Jacob (Abraham ben Jacob), published in the Amsterdam Haggadah.

I offer that we need both the cartographer and the surfer as we navigate the future of Jewish arts and culture.

We need those who can help us chart a course, build infrastructure, and establish a shared vision. We also need those willing to read the changing tides, experiment, take risks, and respond creatively to what is unfolding around us.

And perhaps, most importantly, we need to recognize that none of us is navigating these waters alone.

I choose to imagine our future as a shared, almost Odyssean voyage. There will undoubtedly be dragons, unexpected storms, and moments when the shoreline feels very far away. But there will also be discoveries, new partnerships, and opportunities that none of us could have anticipated when we first set sail.

So I leave you with the question we were asked in Detroit: **Are you a cartographer or a surfer? And where might we meet, out on the waves or along the shore?**

My traveler's prayer is that the extraordinary vision, creativity, and commitment I witnessed at the CANVAS Summit receive the support we deserve to flourish. And that together, we continue building a Jewish cultural future expansive enough for all of us to find our place within it.

Reflections from the 2026 CANVAS Jewish Arts and Culture Summit, Detroit, October 25–27, 2026

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