

DOING THE SINGLE MINGLE IN PORTLAND, OR
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By Kimberly Gadette

"Husband, would you mind terribly if I removed my wedding ring so I can trawl Portland's single Jewish community?"

He gave me a funny look.

I explained that if I were to get the real picture of Jewish single life, I'd have to blend in...and though it was beautiful, a substantially-carated wedding ring simply didn't blend.

But all my efforts as Single Girl Undercover, my homage to a Hunter Thompson-esque "Gonzo Journalism, Oy!" was for naught. My assumed name, the fake email address, the searing separation of ring from finger...unnecessary. It turns out that in the City of Roses, there's no singles scene per se.

Instead, all events/activities are open to both singles and couples. But like my ring, there's a catch --namely, age restrictions. While the 21-39 age group holds as many events as Portland has trees, the 40+ crowd is ignored. Chopped liver, move over.

But like my running to grab a ball at the Coed Dodgeball game before the whistle, I'm getting ahead of myself.

According to a current demographic study, among the population of 2.1 million in the Portland Metro area, 39,000 Jews reside within 25,000 households. Throw in another 9,800 additional households of people with a Judaic background, and *gutinue*, that's some substantial number for a singles mixer or two.

Oops, there I go again, stepping on toes. (Did I mention Café Shalom's Israeli dancing? Big crowd, awfully nice --until I stomped on one too many dancing shoes).

Anyhoo, back to the trashing of the traditional singles concept or, as Portland organizers decry, "We don't do mixers! Ever!" Instead, they believe in that old axiom of *Do what you love, and you might run into someone who loves it, too.*

Here in Portland, what is loved is the environment, local beer, music, movies, books and activities entailing hikes, bikes and balls.

Speaking of balls, I ran headlong into the above-mentioned dodgeball game planned by Portland's go-to sporting and party event planner, one 30-year-old Jodi

Berris, who's employed fulltime, works out twice daily, volunteers with the Ski Patrol and the Fire Department, works with both Portland Jewish Events and Moishe House, and plans eight events per month. (The Energizer Bunny called; he wants his batteries back.) With her war cry of "strictly Kosher, strictly fun!," she'd recently made an exception to her ages 21-39 rule, forming a 40+ Coed Dodgeball & Drinks League.

And so, outfitted in spandex shorts and sneakers, sans ring, this faux single Jewess set out to court the court.

Picture fifty aggressive Jews split into four teams, sporting such names as The Pepcid AC's and The Depends. The game was just as I remembered from grammar school except that my skill level, barely acceptable when I was nine, had plummeted. But my lungs were strong, and the shrieks ripping up through my esophagus every time a ball neared my head were quite impressive. Some in the balanced gender crowd were more social than others. Just like grammar school.

Other than dodgeball, Jodi holds kickball and basketball leagues, birthright Israel trips and barn club parties, in which she takes over large venues, hires a DJ, and serves Kosher food and beer. "My definition of success is that 100 people come to my party, and say, 'awesome.' They meet people, party hard, and want to come back." She slyly adds, "And then I invite them to a Shabbat dinner and they get more connected Jewishly." She reports that singles who've met at her events have gotten together --so far, three couples have wed.

Another 20s-30s group is the more intimate Urban Jews PDX, formed as a reaction to concerns over Portland's lack of cohesion within the Jewish community. Urban Jews is educationally-based, hosting lectures, study groups and service programs. But they also hold hikes with the subgroup, "Mosaic." Another offspring, Beit Kayam, is an eco-Jewish house involved with environmental issues and sustainability.

Per Beit Kayam's founder, Shoshanna Krall: "My personal bias is that specific 'singles events' may actually result in relationships of poorer quality than do events organized around common interests. I'd rather spend my time in groups organized around common causes rather than at events designed for the exclusive purpose of hooking people up. An emphasis on the meat-market mentality is a denial of the true power, abilities and desires of people in their twenties and thirties."

Also skirting the classic social mixer scene, boasting "a no-pressure environment," is the post-college, pre-kids group of Hinenu, stating "This is *not* your Bubbe's Judaism!" Affiliated with conservative temple Nevah Shalom, Hinenu holds movie nights, Shabbatlucks (potluck Shabbat dinners) and, being Portland, wetlands restoration projects.

Frustrated, I mentioned the above groups' age limitations to Todd, a bespectacled broker who I'd met at Jodi's dodgeball after-party. He urged me to ignore the rules and just go. "You could pass...put on more make-up and maybe, um, a long blonde wig."

I nodded gamely, with visions of the septuagenarian Mae West in "Myra Breckinridge" dancing in my head.

And that's where the heartbreak is. Not on missed connections or a lonely Saturday night. It's the fact that Portland's 40+ crowd is being skipped over --and no, that's not a new activity.

But I've been talking to that Energizer Bunny, Jodi. She's looking into it. Maybe if she cuts her workout down to once a day, there's hope.

Now where'd I put that wedding ring?