



Gender Education

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How do we fully open Jewish life to women without losing men? How might we address the needs of teenage boys without sacrificing the relatively recent focus on girls? Concern about the engagement of boys in Jewish life might seem odd to some; girls and women still encounter gender-based expectations and restrictions (especially in Orthodoxy), as well as the still-stifling glass ceiling in Jewish communal life. And yet, observing men step back from certain areas of Jewish life — though not from positions of leadership — at the same moment that Jewish women are assuming more visible positions, points to the importance of examining these apparent trends, and exploring strategies to constructively address them.

We look first at education and consider the impact of gender — specifically during the teen years. We know that gender exists on a spectrum, and that neither all boys nor all girls act similarly; we know that teens, especially, function on multiple levels of identity simultaneously; we know that masculinity in the 21st century is changing, just as femininity evolved during the 20th century. In an effort to help all our children live a rich and meaningful Jewish life, *Sh'ma* focuses its lens this month on the lives of boys as they experience Judaism now, and in the future. —SB

Teens, Gender, and Identity

DEBORAH MEYER

“Who am I and who do I want to become?” These existential questions are central to the teen experience. The task of adolescence is to explore and construct a personal identity. This search for meaning provides fertile opportunities for those of us committed to building the Jewish future and to more life-affirming and nuanced expressions of what it means to be a man or woman.

We are living in a time of great transition, with almost as many women as men in the workforce, and more men actively involved in parenting. Yet popular culture sends contradictory messages about masculinity and femininity: Despite gains over the past three decades, products are still sold with highly sexualized images of women, and our society’s definition of masculinity is often conflicted. On the one hand, boys are encouraged to get in touch with their feelings; on the other, popular culture pushes a hypermasculine, “gangster” image. Teens need help reading culture and constructing gender identity across a full spectrum, rather than from restrictive polar opposites.

In addition, teens need help making positive life choices. Fostering a meaningful and lasting connection with Judaism is valuable not only for its own sake; research suggests that connecting to religious communities correlates with higher grades, lower levels of drinking and drug use, and other dimensions of healthy development. However, the Jewish community by and large is missing this golden opportunity.

American Jewish teens today, like their parents, have access to all aspects of society — where they work, live, and play — which enables them to choose whether and how to participate in Jewish life. If we want teens to choose Jewish activities and build connections to Judaism that will carry into adulthood, we need to provide meaningful experiences that serve and engage them. Unfortunately, teens are voting with their feet. Teens drop out of formal



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Jewish education steadily after *bat* and *bar mitzvah*; by their senior year of high school, only 24 percent of girls and seventeen percent of boys participate. Even Jewishly active teens are dissatisfied with much of what they find — boys more so than girls. As Jordan, a teen, said, “*At this age we want to dig more and learn more about things. We need a deeper meaning.*”

We’ve learned that girls are drawn, for example, to Rosh Hodesh groups* — experiences that are fun and also intellectually challenging. The groups draw on Jewish text and tradition to explore the issues girls grapple with daily — body image, friendship, sexuality, and academic pressure, to name a few. Meeting girls where they are with creative engaging activities, significant conversations that touch them personally, and Jewish values and traditions that help

them explore the issues they care about most, demonstrates how we might approach engagement with boys.

Ironically, boys are given fewer opportunities than girls to consider gender and the possibilities of adulthood, including what roles work and relationships will play in their lives.

The Jewish community should help both teenage boys and girls navigate this terrain. We must start from an understanding of who boys are, what they enjoy doing, and what issues inspire and engage them. By helping teens steer their way through adolescence, and by helping them filter our culture’s often limiting messages about gender — about what it means to be a man or a woman — we will demonstrate that Judaism has a place in their lives, now, and into their adult years.

* Moving Traditions (movingtraditions.org) operates Rosh Hodesh: It’s a Girl’s Thing and manages several research projects and focus groups on gender and education.

Moments of Opportunity

SHIRA D. EPSTEIN

In the early 20th century, the “boy problem” took center stage in educational debates and discourse. Psychologist G. Stanley Hall argued that classrooms and curricula were becoming feminized, and public schools were in danger of losing boys to the streets. His writings broadly impacted educational policy, resulting in initiatives that today we take for granted as el-

off of male participation in formal Jewish educational programming could focus attention on targeting “Jewish boys” as a uniform constituency with identical issues and needs, and launch discussions about the types of programming that are perceived to attract all boys to Jewish life. Focus on a “boy crisis” can undermine the necessity of creating vibrant educational programming as a conduit to Jewish communal living and participation for *all* adolescents. Deborah Meyer notes that today’s youth are bombarded with messages regarding how they are supposed to think, feel, and act. The heightened attention in Jewish education to gender issues can become an opportunity for educators to reexamine how we engage male and female teens with curricular content material. Organizations such as Moving Traditions and the JTS project “Addressing Evaded Issues in Jewish Education” are working toward systemic change in how Jewish youth educators are trained to relate Jewish texts, rituals, and practice to learners’ lives.

Curricular plans often exclude formal discussion with adolescents about the pressures weighing heavily upon them day-to-day, and ironically, some of these very pressures often keep them from deepening their participation in Jewish study and practice. Jewish teenagers

We can demonstrate that Judaism connects to their experiences by creating programming that meaningfully integrates discussion of issues that are part of their realities.

ements of schooling: administrators created athletic programs to both foster and provide an outlet for innate male aggression and established student government initiatives in hopes of encouraging boys to adopt leadership roles. Girls became both the literal and figurative cheerleaders as attention focused on how to engage boys in formal education.

Hot educational topics tend to resurface in cycles, and the discourse of a “boy crisis” once again permeates discussions of American and Jewish education, offering challenges and opportunities. The current concern about the drop-

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February 2009/Sh'vat 5769
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today feel quite comfortable, as Deborah Meyer notes, “voting with their feet.” Many teens have pulled away from participating in Jewish programming to instead prioritize activities they and their parents perceive as better helping them advance academically or deepen their social connections. While we cannot address all the pressures teens face, we can create programming that meaningfully integrates issues that are part of their lived realities. Several curricula now exist that help Jewish educators explore a range of topics that both boys and girls face, including: pressures to succeed and fears of failure; competition with friends; the balance between self-assertion and sensitivity to the needs of others; the quest for perfection;

sexuality and mixed messages; and explorations of gender identity and roles (e.g.; *Hineini*, Keshet Boston; *Life Choices*, Tzelem; *Love Shouldn't Hurt*, Shalom Bayit; *Strong Girls*, *Good Guys Initiatives*, JWI; *Rosh Hodesh: It's a Girl's Thing*).

Jewish educators have new opportunities to help teens connect Jewish content and their daily lives. Through these encounters, we will better focus our energies on the teens who show up in our classrooms, camps, after-school programs, youth groups, and service learning projects. Our discourse will move from a language of crisis to a language of opportunity; our discourse will focus on new possibilities for adolescent programming and Jewish education. ●

Jewish Guys Talking: The Role of Gender in Recruitment & Retention

SAUL KAISERMAN, DANNY MISHKIN, & DAVID WOLKIN

David Wolkin: Initially I never thought my gender would play a role in my work as an educator. While I'm much aware of the privileges available to me as a male, I wish I were recognized for my passion, creativity, and experience rather than my gender; as I've been told more than once, “one of your more marketable qualities is that you're a guy.”

Saul Kaiserman: Although there are relatively few men working as Jewish educators, most of the top positions in the field are held by men. I have to imagine that remuneration is a factor for many of them. No one goes into Jewish education expecting to make a killing, but there's no doubt that I have remained in this field because I have been able to earn a living and support my family.

Danny Mishkin: A clear path toward a profession in Jewish education exists for teens who are musicians or leaders of a youth group. But my teenage community was mainly focused on athletic teams and childhood friends, and we never practiced Judaism together. After college, I assumed that I would be a secular school teacher and athletic coach. I meet very few Jewish educators who were serious athletes in high school. I hope to empower teens who learned perseverance, loyalty, and commitment in playing sports, to express those values in the Jewish community.

Kaiserman: Danny, you and I were both inspired by male rabbis who gave us our first jobs

in education and continue to serve as our mentors. These sorts of relationships seem to be critical not only for recruitment but also for retention. We talk so much about the need for male adults to be role models; yet, I don't know if I've done anything to encourage young men to get and to stay involved in this field.

Wolkin: It troubles me when the conversation about recruiting the best Jewish educators to the field is put under the constraint of a gender binary, leaving out anyone for whom gender is a matter of conflict or confusion. Is it not possible for us to create safe spaces for anyone who feels that they are both or neither? Educators need to be well-versed in a million different issues both Jewish and universal, and the complexity of gender in today's world is just one of them.

Mishkin: Unlike most professions, Jewish education is a field that encompasses and relies on such a diverse group of people. To me, the strength of the profession is that it enables individuals to bring their unique talents and knowledge to the Jewish community. Individuals should not have to feel that they need to conform to fit into a certain mold to work as Jewish educators, but that they strengthen the community through their participation. And, in turn, they themselves will be transformed in meaningful ways by their experience working within the profession.

Kaiserman: Jewish communities and the

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February 2009/Sh'vat 5769
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