



The Revolution In Teen Outreach

Synagogues, educational groups rethinking offerings and restructuring programs to reach a new generation.

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Associate Editor
Tuesday, January 11, 2011



Eighth graders at Temple Emanu-El volunteer at Harlem's Association to Benefit Children as part of a service-learning program.

For eighth graders enrolled in Temple Emanu-El's religious school Temple Emanu-El's religious school, the lessons this year are less aleph-bet and more ABC.

Once a month, the young teens make the short trek from Upper East Side to East Harlem to volunteer with elementary-age kids at the Association to Benefit Children, an agency that offers numerous services for disadvantaged children.

At Emanu-El, volunteering is not part of the eighth-grade curriculum: it is the curriculum. Before each volunteer gig, where the students help with homework, read stories and lead games for kindergarteners and first graders, they are required to participate in a learning session at the temple in which they discuss relevant Jewish texts (recently it was "Teach each child according to his way" from Proverbs). They also study Jewish teachings on social justice, and learn about advocacy and fundraising.

The same is true in the Reform congregation's seventh grade, which this year replaced its weekly classes with Mitzvah Corps, a program in which kids perform community service at a variety of venues.

Emanu-El is hardly the only Jewish institution rethinking its teen offerings. A growing number of synagogues are restructuring their teen programs to make them more informal and "experiential." And they are also offering a wider variety of options from which to choose, emphasizing service learning (as in community service, not worship service) and the arts.

Only a small percentage of American Jewish teens attend day high schools or yeshivas. And with "post b'nai mitzvah dropout" one of the most frequently uttered terms in Jewish education circles, and with "emerging adulthood" a new buzz phrase among Jews and non-Jews alike, there is an increasing sense that reaching today's Jewish adolescents means looking beyond the old menu of youth group, Hebrew high school and old-style summer camp.

Such institutions, many of which have changed little in decades, "work for some kids, but clearly not enough kids," says David Bryfman, director of the Center for Collaborative Leadership at the Jewish Education Project (formerly BJENY-SAJES).

Together with UJA-Federation of New York's Task Force on Experiments in Teen Engagement — which recently commissioned a study of New York teens, their parents and various Jewish program providers — Bryfman's agency is seeking to promote innovation in the field, particularly in the area of technology.

“One of the areas we're working on is how can we better utilize social media, online gaming and other digital media” in Jewish education, Bryfman said, adding that the groups are “seriously exploring the development of cell phone applications that can be used in Jewish education.”

Other new initiatives in the Jewish teen world include:

- Moving Traditions, the Philadelphia group behind “Rosh Hodesh: It's A Girl Thing” programs for teen girls is about to launch The Brotherhood in several New York locations, a program that aims to counter low Jewish involvement levels among teenage boys.
- The Jewish Student Union, a network of Jewish after-school clubs meeting in public schools, recently received a \$1.5 million grant from the Jim Joseph Foundation to expand to Westchester County, Fairfield County and south Florida. (See article on page 32) Similarly, The Curriculum Initiative partners with private secular high schools to introduce Jewish content into student clubs, all-school assemblies and classrooms.
- Brandeis University recently established an Office of High School Programs, offering various learning and social justice-focused projects for affiliated and unaffiliated teens, including Russian speakers. The office was one of 50 innovative Jewish organizations recognized in this year's Slingshot guide, which described it as “a laboratory to grow existing programs as well as an engine to push the boundaries of the Jewish community by launching new ideas and experiments.”
- A new certificate program for professionals working in Jewish teen engagement (also with funding from the Jim Joseph Foundation) is in the planning stages at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.

The trend of postponing marriage and childbearing, and thus extending adolescence or “emerging adulthood” into the 20s (not to mention the growing likelihood that the eventual marriage will be an interfaith one), has added new urgency to the calls for improved teen and youth engagement.

“There's a whole period in the lifecycle of young adults where they are involved in thinking about and doing Jewish things in very different ways than the standard Jewish world has been offering,” said Jo Kay, director of HUC's New York School of Education. While American Jewish institutions used to figure that lost teens could be brought back into organized Jewish life once they married and had children, now “Someone from after their bar or bat mitzvah might not step into a synagogue for 20 years,” Kay said.

“We in the field need to do everything we can to retool and to understand the needs of this particular population and the things they're interested in,” she said. “We don't believe they're not interested in Judaism or being Jewish, but they access that in very different ways” than other generations have.

Some formal classroom models for high school students are thriving, particularly community-based ones such as the Bergen County High School for Jewish Studies in New Jersey. However, a growing number of synagogues, particularly Reform ones, are tearing down the distinctions between “formal” (classroom learning) and “informal” (youth group, retreats) education programs for teens, with some merging them completely or shifting to an entirely informal model.

“That dichotomy” between formal and informal “is not effective anymore, especially when the two are competing for the same kids,” Bryfman noted. “Many places are looking at a blended model: it's a trend, but not pervasive yet.”

Four years ago, the Reform Temple of Forest Hills [full disclosure: this writer is a temple member], combined its high school and youth group into ToFHY-High, a weekly informal program for 13-to-18-year-olds.

“Teens don't have that much time and giving up two days sometimes to go to a [youth group] meeting and for high school can be very troublesome,” said Faye Gilman, the Queens temple's education leader. “We decided to figure out a way to do it all at once so they didn't have to give up two nights.”

Teens choose topics for study based on their interest, rather than their grade level, with teachers, the rabbis and the cantor offering units on trope, spirituality, the prayer service and other subjects, responding to suggestions from the teens.

“Once upon a time, there was a textbook, there was a grade, they learned in classrooms and it ended at 10th grade with confirmation,” Gilman said, noting that the post bar-bat mitzvah “retention rate has gone up immensely,” in the four years since the program’s restructuring.

Forty-two teens are registered for ToFHY-High and “this year only one or two kids didn’t sign up [again] between seventh and eighth grade,” Gilman said.

At Emanu-El, teens can be involved in a variety of ways, from confirmation classes, to attending individual events and weekend trips to helping plan a fundraising benefit event (a program initiated at the suggestion of teens and which raised \$13,000 last year for the American Jewish World Service’s Haitian earthquake relief efforts).

Daniel Mishkin, the synagogue’s coordinator of youth and young adult learning, tracks all the congregation’s high school kids on a spreadsheet, assigning them rankings from one (meaning, their name is known, but they haven’t attended any programs yet) to five (actively involved and in a leadership position) to denote their level of engagement.

“I have a goal for each kid,” he said, noting that he invests extensive time making phone calls and getting to know each teen individually. “I wish we could get to all the number ones.”

About 80 students are involved on some level above two, with 32 ranking as four or higher.

While post-bar/bat mitzvah retention rates remain fairly low, with about 25 percent of kids continuing from seventh grade to eighth grade, Mishkin notes that the rates are improving and “we have a lot of mechanisms for getting them involved again later.”

For Olivia Klein, an eighth grader at Chapin who is a regular participant in Emanu-El’s Lirdof Tzedek service-learning program, there was little question about continuing after her bat mitzvah.

“My bat mitzvah speech was about volunteering at the ABC program,” she said. “I really like doing different activities to help people who are less fortunate than I am. It feels good.”

Although most of her friends from other synagogues stopped their Jewish educations as soon as they had their bar/bat mitzvah, Olivia said she “definitely wanted to continue.”

“This is a really good opportunity, not just for learning life lessons but learning about my religion.”