

Op-Ed: What to do about Jewish teens

By Adam Gaynor · April 26, 2010

NEW YORK (JTA) -- Observers of Jewish education for teens are increasingly concerned about a disparity between the participation of boys and girls. Lamenting the absence of boys in youth programs, Jewish educators and philanthropists have turned their attention more and more to enticing boys to become involved.

I wonder, however, whether the concern over boys masks a deeper issue that is more difficult to confront: Jewish teen participation rates are abysmal in general, regardless of gender.

Rather than lament the misguided notion that we have disenfranchised boys in the Jewish community, let's focus on how to empower all Jewish teens.

Admittedly, most rational people fear teens. We fear their hormones and mood swings. We fear their experimentation with substances and sexuality. We fear their penchant for argument. We don't know how to approach them or curry favor with them. Most professionals steer clear.

This seems to be true for many funders as well. Everyone is interested in primary Jewish education, with its crown Jewel of bar/bat mitzvah, and recently, major initiatives such as the reinvigoration of Hillel, the explosive growth of Chabad and the founding of Birthright Israel and Repair the World have targeted 18- to 26-year-olds.

Clearly, to be a young adult is hip. They get to dig ditches in Guatemala for spring break, fly to Israel for free, and choose a myriad of free activities at campus Jewish centers and Moishe Houses.

In contrast, options for Jewish high school students haven't changed much since the 1950s, and despite impressive initiatives in Jewish camping and in particular Jewish communities, day school tuition and synagogue-based programs remain prohibitively expensive.

Nor do researchers take much interest in Jewish teens. The study that everyone cites on teen participation rates, "Being a Jewish Teenager in America: Trying to Make It," already is 10 years old. I am hard-pressed to identify any rigorous large-scale studies that have been conducted since.

So what do we know about teens? Anyone who has taken Psychology 101 is aware that a defining aspect of teen development is a process of identity exploration, individuation and independence from parents, much of which occurs through the medium of a tightly knit peer group.

For the 85-88 percent of teens who do not attend Jewish day school, the 60-plus percent of teens whose families do not belong to a synagogue and the huge numbers of teens who do not participate in Jewish youth groups or camps, the peer group more often than not is a religiously, racially, ethnically and sometimes economically diverse group.

Faced with this reality, one option is to continue with business as usual: We can alienate a majority of Jewish teens by continuing to insist that they only bring their full Jewish selves to bear in Jewishly exclusive spaces. However, it is pretty clear that the standard model of ripping teens out of their everyday lives and placing them in artificial, Jewish-only peer groups has failed for all but the most affiliated teens.

Or we can promote Jewish learning that focuses on meaning-making and encourages teens to integrate their Jewish selves into every aspect of their lives.

To be sure, many believe that the purpose of American Jewish education is to prevent assimilation.

Wake up! We have already assimilated! Jewish teens see themselves in Rahm Emanuel, Sarah Silverman and Adam Lambert, among others. Jewish teens are smart, savvy and motivated. They understand complexity and fill their lives with myriad academic and extracurricular pursuits.

This is not a value judgment; it is simply reality. If we continue to frame Jewish learning as peripheral, as something to do in isolation from their friends and everyday activities, then how will Jewish values ever find a place in their lives?

Several initiatives have successfully developed models for Jewish learning in secular spaces.

The Curriculum Initiative partners with private high schools to introduce Jewish content into student clubs, all-school assemblies and classrooms. By partnering with Jewish student leaders and their teachers, TCI develops and teaches Jewish content that is rooted in student interests and developmental needs.

The Jewish Outreach Institute takes a similar approach by running Jewish programs in public spaces, where barriers to participation are lower than what is typically found in Jewish institutions. Even BBYO has conducted "Rock the Vote" programs at public high schools.

The beauty of Jewish tradition is that it imagines that every place and every act from the most mundane to the most extraordinary can be infused with meaning. This sense of integration should guide Jewish education.

Integration does not connote a "watering down" of Jewish learning. In-depth Jewish learning should be able to match the rigor of any learning and should energize Jewish teens and their friends. By way of comparison, wouldn't it be absurd to assert that African-American studies are only relevant to African Americans? That African-American studies can only be rigorously pursued in historically African-American schools and colleges with exclusively African-American teachers?

Jewish students may internalize and personalize Jewish learning differently from their peers, but that should not affect the quality of the learning nor the potential impact.

Jewish teen education is in need of a massive paradigm shift, but the hand wringing about what to do is silly. All we have to do is talk to teens. They understand their worlds better than we do.

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