


programs training educators, especially, need to be more aware and accepting of an ever-increasing diversity of needs, interests, identifications, and learning styles. Educators and those who train them must work side by side to create environments that enable a wider variety of forms of Jewish participation. At the same time, when there are so many ways to participate, we need to develop collective and shared sets of standards both for what good teaching looks like and what a successful Jewish education provides. For ex-

ample, how might we help educators articulate a “reflected-upon stance” on keeping kosher or on the political situation in Israel? Teacher training programs and educational institutions should reflect those standards, and all members of the community, whether professional or lay, should hold one another accountable to meeting them. Jewish communities that celebrate differences and encourage participation while maintaining high standards, will be more likely to attract intelligent, capable, and committed people to serve them. 

All Systems Go: Masculinity in a Jewish High School

MARC BAKER

Several weeks ago, I spent a spirited Shabbaton with our ninth grade class. A number of male and female educators and role models were present and two of the male rabbis in the school brought their wives and children. While our students spent Shabbat with their rabbi teachers, they also saw them as husbands, parents, and fellow Shabbat observers. The ninth grade dean, reflecting on his own high school experience, talked about social dynamics and the pressures that all high school students face. During Kabbalat Shabbat, the boys joined hands and danced, ultimately erupting into what I would call a *niggun* mosh pit. On a Friday night during their first year of high school, these teenage boys’ raucous male energy was channeled into a social-physical-spiritual bonding experience.

Later in the evening, during what we call a “fishbowl,” the entire grade sat together with faculty in a large circle. I listened as girls *and* boys shared personal stories about times when they pushed themselves beyond their comfort zones. On Shabbat afternoon, we augmented our praying, singing, dancing, and sharing with games and sports, different outlets for our students’ energy; I played ping-pong with several boys — an opportunity to get physical and to ignite our competitive spirits, which connected us in different yet sacred ways.

This Shabbaton offers a window into the unique power of a Jewish high school education and its capacity to nurture and inspire the Jewish adolescent identities of its students. The challenges to cultivating sophisticated and passionate Jewish young adults (let alone, simply, engaged) do parallel the challenges to cultivating thoughtful and responsible young Americans and human beings who are reflective and self-

aware about gender, sexuality, relationships, and personal identity.

While family, youth groups, camps, and other informal educational venues strongly influence adolescent identity, high schools — the teachers, peer groups, and experiences — have an unusually profound impact on the lives of their students. Jewish high schools are uniquely situated to turn challenges into opportunities, of which I share two:

- the totality and holistic quality of the experience
- the frequency and intensity of students’ relationships with compelling, authentic adult role models

Precisely as teenagers are coming of age intellectually, physically, emotionally, and spiritually, a Jewish high school immerses students in both formal (explicit curricular) and informal (“hidden,” but hopefully conscious, curricular) opportunities to engage all aspects of themselves. This is clearly not simple. How does a health curriculum or biology class, for example, address issues of gender, sexuality, and body image in ways that students find relevant and respectful, rather than preachy and artificial? How does a classroom teacher push boys who are self-confident and intellectually aggressive to respect and make space for equally intelligent but less-assertive girls? Dilemmas like these challenge us to clarify our ethical and educational values while striving to understand and connect to boys’ heads and hearts.


During a time of life that can feel frightening and disconnected, Jewish high school can be a *tikkun* for the bifurcated lives and identities so many Jewish teenagers live. In addition to a wide range of formative experiences that come together “under one roof,” these experiences

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take place under the guidance and positive influence of educators who themselves model integrated, holistic Jewish-American human identities. As we think about masculinity and Jewish identity, imagine a boy praying (or at least attending *minyan*) next to his soccer coach; spending Shabbat with his history teacher; reading or writing in his school newspaper about Israel or teenage Jewish identity; meeting with his theater director to discuss how to negotiate his Jewish journey with his family's religious practice so that he both respects his parents and honors his personal integrity; playing basketball with his head of school and then,

over kosher Chinese food, discussing whether or not to stay together with his girlfriend when they go off to college. These moments are building blocks of their identity as Jews and young men; they shape the lenses through which students view the world and the choices they will make as they gain independence.

While the balance may never be “perfectly harmonious,” Jewish high school does, in Deborah Meyer’s words, “help them (teenage boys) explore how to live a meaningfully engaged Jewish life where work, family, and leisure” are woven together in meaningful ways. 

“Bros” and “Hos” in Jewish Life Today

DAVID BRYFMAN

On the final night of their 12th grade youth group convention the boys gather in a dark room. Passing around a candle, each explains what their youth group experience has meant to them. Many weep openly and hug one another, expressing heartfelt feelings of belonging and a fear of entering a world without their fellow youth group members.

Scenes like this are familiar to those in the world of informal Jewish education.

Two hours earlier I had observed the same group; the only difference was that girls were present:

The guys start chanting and the females respond. At first the chants are innocuous but before long the frenzied males begin jumping up and down, some taking off their T-shirts, sweating, and screaming chants that include such lines as “make me a sandwich,” “suck my...,” or even more graphic verses adapted from military movies. The adult advisors and professionals sit back and watch.

Hours after this observation, the same teens conducted a beautiful *havdalah* service. A week later, they participated in a charity walk to raise money for juvenile diabetes. And a few weeks after that, they conducted Shabbat services at the local synagogue.

Recent communal discussions have raised questions about “where the boys have gone.” Statistically it’s a valid question; some Jewish youth organizations are reporting a 70:30 split of females-to-males.

At its core, though, this question is about understanding teenagers today. In my many

years working with this age group, I have encountered thousands of Jewish teenagers living around the world. Although somewhat alarming, the episodes I shared above are not isolated incidents. I’m no longer surprised when girls call one another “ho,” “slut,” or “whore” — in their lexicon, these are terms of endearment. Nor do explicit conversations about sexuality, half-naked images on social networking Websites, or bros flashing one another, register shockwaves anymore.

Teenagers today are operating within apparently conflicting value systems and identities.

What, if anything, distinguishes these Jewish teenagers from their non-Jewish counterparts? While it appears that these Jewish teens have assimilated the cultural norms of various adolescent peer groups with whom they associate, what makes these episodes stand out is that they all occurred within Jewish contexts. Teenagers today are operating within apparently conflicting value systems and identities.

I offer three broad claims about gender in Jewish youth engagement: First, teenagers (and their parents) are leaving Jewish education en masse after the age of bar and bat mitzvah, and males are escaping faster and more furiously than females; second, contrary to political correctness there are differences — both biologically and socially constructed — between males and females; and finally, central to adolescence is the search for identity. Even though boys grunt and

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