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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 mitzva*; 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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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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talk in single syllables, their behavior is not an indication that they don't possess and/or won't cultivate thoughtful caring relationships.


Drawing on these claims, I offer the following implications and suggestions about how to attract not only more males, but Jewish teenagers in general.

Accept that boys will be boys. In the move to redress centuries of patriarchy, Jewish rituals, spirituality, leadership, and education have gradually been feminized. While I acknowledge that not all boys are the same, and that there is indeed a vast spectrum of "typical" boy behavior, the release of testosterone, aggression, and competition must be embraced rather than shunned. We should not condone sexism or intolerance, but we must accept that these phenomena exist and address them.

Recruit and train more educators. We lack teachers, advisors, and counselors in the Jewish community who are qualified to address issues

of gender and sexuality. This reflects a general inadequacy of training and professional development for youth educators in the Jewish community. It is essential to remember that despite teens' quest to be independent and autonomous, they still crave positive role models in their lives.

Listen to teenage voices. Today, teens transition between multiple identities with great ease. In order to understand our teens we must hear their voices. Organizations that cater to teens but do not include their voices, at all levels of deliberations, will be deemed irrelevant.

Rather than blaming pop culture or other teenagers, we should accept that issues of gender and sexuality permeate all of our youth work. The question about where have all the boys gone is not simply an issue of marketing or programming, but one that forces us to ask who our teenagers really are, and what they truly want and need from the Jewish community. 

Restrictive Masculinities: Programming and Jewish Boys

PETER KURILOFF & MICHAEL REICHERT

David Bryfman concludes his article by saying that the question about "where the Jewish boys have gone" is not *just* about programming, but about who they are and what they want and need from the Jewish community. He argues that to understand the answers to these questions requires listening carefully to boys. Bryfman has it right and much is already known about what boys in general want and need. Further, current research on Jewish boys not only teaches us what Jewish boys say they want but also reinforces what boys in general need.

American boys grow up in a culture dominated by highly restrictive forms of masculinity. Boys learn that men are supposed to be tough, emotionally controlled, physically and verbally aggressive, and socially dominant. To measure up, they must strive to be cool and inexpressive. They must avoid revealing their affectionate and caring natures. Their most visible models are professional athletes, military figures, and male movie heroes who are praised for taking risks, 'sucking it up,' and playing through pain.

In our research on boys and schools, we have discovered that many of the nation's finest private schools were founded explicitly to teach

White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant boys to rule through just such gender practices. Despite co-education and liberalization, many of these schools still embody vestiges of this hidden curriculum. Public schools, though confronting very different social and economic forces, are also crucibles in which boys develop their identities against narrow versions of masculinity.

For boys who adopt such restrictive masculine identities, the consequences — in terms of depression, anxiety, violence, and serious risk-taking (from drugs to impaired driving to unprotected sex) — are well documented. But boys are not passive recipients of society's gender regime; there are forces of self-determination and ethnocultural values that can mitigate mainstream masculinities. Over and against schools' man-making curricula, boys co-construct personal identities that are more suited to their characters, tastes, subcultures, and social class. To the extent that their families, schools, communities, and religious institutions provide supports, boys can access and even embrace alternative masculine identities — ones that protect them from the costlier sacrifices of growing up male in our society. What do such supports look like?

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Abundant research about boys and girls points to caring families that maintain open lines of communication as well as to robust emotional connections with people outside of their homes. It points to families, neighborhoods, schools, and religious organizations that provide encouragement, set consistent expectations for behavior, and take responsibility for monitoring it. It suggests the importance of having a home base as well as of spending significant time weekly in clubs and sports and religious institutions. And, it points to those institutions that empower youth by listening to them, valuing their ideas, giving them real responsibilities and real opportunities for service.


These findings have clear implications for organizations that wish to serve boys effectively. Adolescents are thoughtful and highly idealistic. They want to discuss deep questions and have an unerring nose for hypocrisy. Any parent who has been caught in an important contradiction has learned this painfully. Agencies that want to engage boys must create safe spaces in which they are free to explore difficult issues with role models who will be honest with them while also cherishing the boys' honesty in return. Attempts to shut off discussion, duck issues or "make nice" will drive boys underground and eventually drive them out.

A corollary of this is that boys want to have a say in what they do. Organizations must invite boys to co-construct programs designed for them. With such help they will revel in working together to develop goals, create strategies, and execute plans. Wise mentors will go gently in trying to control either the content of programs or boys' relationships with each other. Instead, relying on boys' intense loyalty, fierce devotion to fairness, and latent desire to care for others, they can rally them to fight injustice — particularly to oppose the dominant masculine practice of "othering" "out-groups" in the service of "in-group" solidarity. Helping boys focus

their passion for social justice to achieve tangible ends, modeling compassion and honesty, and providing them opportunities to lead — whether it be by working with younger boys or by tackling an addressable community problem — are central elements of effective programming. There is evidence that such approaches work for Jewish boys.

Research conducted for Moving Traditions on boys affiliated with synagogues, youth groups, camps, day or Hebrew high schools, affirmed the prophylactic qualities of caring human connec-

Boys thrived when given opportunities to shape the terms of their engagement, question, think deeply, and relate intimately with other Jewish boys.

tions, engagement, and constructive work. It revealed how the boys thrived when given opportunities to shape the terms of their engagement, question, think deeply, and relate intimately with other Jewish boys. As one boy said, "At this age we want to dig more.... We need deeper meaning." It also showed how the boys drew on their Jewish values. They cared passionately about social justice and fighting to protect other students from peer maltreatment. They rejected the penchant of boy culture to promote personal gain and social advantage by putting others down. One boy explained that when he is with Jewish friends, there is no one saying "Oh, you're so gay...." In short, given the proper supports, these boys embraced their Jewish identities while rejecting the more repugnant aspects of dominant masculinities. They were proud of who they were, their love of each other, and their connections to Jewish traditions. Happily, their stories reinforce the research that showed how to work with boys in general while providing clear guidelines for how Jewish organizations might organize themselves to reach and retain broader numbers of Jewish boys. 

For the past seven years, **Sam Ball** has been a director/producer of documentaries for Citizen Film, which produces the New Jewish Filmmaking Project for the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival. His work has been showcased at some of the world's most prestigious venues for independent film, including MoMA New York and the Pompidou Center's Cinéma du Réel in Paris. Two of his films were screened at the Sundance Film Festival and two received Golden Gate Awards at the San Francisco International Film Festival. Ball is currently at work on a film about Algerian-Jewish graphic novelist Joann Sfar, for the Franco-German PBS equivalent, Arte.

Changing Angles: Boys and Girls in Community Filmmaking

SAM BALL

In 2001, thanks to a Joshua Venture fellowship grant for Jewish social entrepreneurship, I launched the New Jewish Filmmaking Project (NJFP) with the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival. For the past seven years, Jewish

teenagers from a range of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds have been collaborating with me and my colleagues at Citizen Film, our documentary production company, to create sophisticated, authentically personal short films.

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Teenagers work closely with our team to turn cameras on themselves, their families, their friends, and their surroundings. Through a nine-month filmmaking process, they explore issues that are most important to them. The resulting films spark frank discussions about Jewish identity in venues ranging from public high schools to synagogues to prestigious international film festivals. The concept for the NJFP is simple: give kids an opportunity to make films with a professional team of mentor-collaborators and they express themselves to their fullest potential — an enticing proposition. We’ve had little trouble recruiting Jewish teens into our program, both boys and girls. But there are special issues in recruiting and retaining both genders.

Ordinary film programs attract mostly boys, perhaps because it’s a technical medium; and then there’s the lure of male-oriented music

A gap — between commitment to tradition and pride in individual accomplishment — manifests itself repeatedly in the ways boys and girls tell stories through films.

videos and films in popular culture. So NJFP found itself confronted by the opposite problem from that which many Jewish organizations face today: we needed to attract more girls.

Our first recruitment tool was inspired by a “Zionist Realist” propaganda poster of the 1920s; the Zionist socialist movement Hashomer Hatzayir used it to recruit young Eastern European Jews to till the fields of Palestine. We replaced the round grain sifter in the image, held by a muscular young man, with a film reel. We aimed to reach out to young people who feel they are on the margins of the American Jewish community. (More than half of our participants to date are the product of mixed marriages and nearly one-quarter are Jews of color.) We chose the image of the young pioneer with a film reel because it was graphically compelling and its message resonated with us. The young man holding the film reel is dark skinned, muscular, and active. He was sifting wheat in the same way we hoped to sift out good stories and plant them in order to renew and sustain our community. We recruited almost exclusively in public schools. We were particularly interested in kids of mixed ethnicity who would tell stories about cultural ambivalence.

Unwittingly, we were marketing primarily to boys. Forty teens applied for ten slots: 29

were boys. So the next year we created a gender-neutral image. The poster, plastered on the walls of public schools and disseminated online, shows a silhouette in an active pose behind a camera looking out at the city. The silhouette could be a boy or a girl. That year, we received 59 applications: 31 boys and 28 girls.

One of our projects, “As Old as Our Eyes,” is a trilogy of films by and about young Bay Area Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union — the largest new wave of Jewish immigrants in the U.S. Fifty-three new immigrants from the former Soviet Union applied; 33 girls and 20 boys. Most of the boys who applied seemed uninterested in storytelling and offered short and cursory responses as to why they wished to be involved with the program. Many girls offered moving reasons about why they wanted to take part in the program: to honor their grandparents or to hold onto a part of themselves — a cultural heritage they were afraid they might lose. The discrepancy between the girls’ and boys’ answers might be attributed to the film’s subject, exploring family relationships, that girls might have thought about more than the boys. Only one boy, Gary, seemed truly serious about telling his story, motivated by the recent death of his grandmother.

A gap — between commitment to tradition and pride in individual accomplishment — manifests itself repeatedly in the ways boys and girls tell stories through NJFP films. In “Not Another Jewish Movie,” a film about Jewish identity made by many teens as a multicolored collage, the boys tend to show off their individuality, whereas the girls talk about family coherence. In other movies, the boys took a backseat on the film’s emotional front while taking an active role behind the camera and in the editing room, helping to craft the girls’ stories into a spare, dramatic arc. Where girls are often interested in working through their emotions by talking about them onscreen, boys prefer to be matter of fact. One challenge in working with boys is to find imagery that hints at unstated or unrecognized emotions. That’s also an opportunity. Expressing emotion without words is one strength of our medium.

In our experience, both boys and girls can be attracted by a Jewish program, though they may participate in it differently. Our program speaks to common needs (self-expression, learning a skill) and draws vitality from aligning diverse interests and modes of expression in complementary ways.

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Approaching Sexual Discovery

DOREEN SEIDLER-FELLER

The issue of how to approach pubescent teen boys enthralled by sex remains a challenging one for educators. There are certain fixed realities to contend with: hormones, the developmental transition away from parents toward peers, sensation-seeking consistent with the appeal of novel experience and the belief that pushing the envelope is an adolescent birthright. In addition there may be drugs, alcohol, and/or mood disorders fueling sexual fantasy and behavior. Importantly, there is also the sociocultural context at work; it drives sexual ambitions in both conscious and unconscious ways toward, not away from, risktaking. And it bathes both sexes in an increasingly sexually explicit and ubiquitous universe.

Boys also grow up with a certain entitlement to sexual discovery, learned from social scripts that define them as the aggressors and facilitate the idea that they are largely controlled by their biological sex drives. They are possessors of a wondrous organ with, arguably, a life of its own, a personality of its own, often a name of its own. While implied in this brief description that scripts differ by gender and are complex, I wouldn't want to leave the impression that girls' scripts today are largely defined by limiting functions in heterosexual practice. Although framing sexual experience and boundary setting remain strong script elements for girls, sexual thinking and the imprint of feminism in the last 30 years has sponsored sexual expectation, expression, and entitlement for girls too, in an unprecedentedly democratic and public way.

Given the overwhelming reinforcing effect of all these factors, the impulse of most educators has been to stick to biology and tell a cautionary tale about pregnancy and disease or to take a moral approach to sex education. Fewer than 10 percent of American students receive a comprehensive sex education (SIECUS). Most are still left to their own educational inclinations from X-rated movies on one extreme to

abstinence-oriented programs on the other and whatever other spam or detritus they can sift through.

A cornerstone of good sex education is to avoid a fear-based curriculum or tone. If we approached driver education or sports the way we approach sex, no one would drive or pursue athletics. It's easy for teens to see the social control agenda in such approaches. The value of adults being able to speak openly, directly, and positively about sex, plays an enormous role in modeling and training adolescents' approaches toward sexual discovery.

We need a partnership between educational settings (both formal and informal) and parents to mesmerize teens with talk and *reflection* about sex rather than reflexive, *experimentally* driven sexual behavior. Parents should think about what and how they want to convey to their adolescents a sex ethic, Jewish or otherwise. Research indicates that parents who discuss sex with their teens, who are relaxed and comfortable in conversation, believe their kids lack knowledge and want to train them to think maturely and focus on school.

Two additional points need to be made about teaching sexuality. The "hidden curriculum" here is the idea that it is the brain, not the penis, which is the central sexual organ. It mediates, reflects, sifts, and considers its options through the prism of ethics, goals, values, opportunities, and so on. It responds and acts through education and cognitive rehearsal, which is incompatible with automatic and impulsive approaches to sex. When we talk about sex, intimacy, and relationships, we reveal and define ourselves, and in so doing, I think, we can help adolescent boys and girls develop a responsive and responsible sexual and relational self. This area demands extensive curricular elaboration and also requires psychological sophistication and, simply, courage. The yardstick of the parent, genuinely conveyed, is never lost.

Doreen Seidler-Feller, PhD, is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Los Angeles specializing in individual and couples treatment for a wide range of psychological disorders and difficulties including the spectrum of anxiety and depressive disorders, sexual and marital dysfunctions, and adjustment to chronic disease. She is an assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry, Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA.

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Working With Youth: A Roundtable

Jan Katzew: *There is a general perception of an imbalance between the participation and engagement of boys and girls in Jewish life, in general, and in youth group activities in particular. Is this perception borne out in your experiences?*

Elyse Winick: In terms of campus leadership in the Conservative movement, the leadership of the *minyanim* and how many people with skills show up and participate, we have a much

Katzew: *Moving on, how do you see online social networking as an untapped or unrealized potential to strengthen the Jewish community in general and the Jewish teen and emergent adult or college age cohorts in particular?*

Winick: While there is untapped potential, the more significant question is the degree to which the online networking has displaced a sense of comfort with interpersonal contact, either by telephone or through face-to-face experiences. So the work we do now — modeling for students, crafting relationships, developing ways of exchanging ideas and speaking with people — is so much more important. While the virtual world can expand possibilities for programming, my own experience with students demonstrates that we're losing something significant with the virtual contact.

To what degree has online social networking displaced a sense of comfort with interpersonal contact, either by telephone or through face-to-face experiences?

higher number of female participants. More young women are stepping up to the plate to take on leadership roles than young men. And this is not a new phenomenon; it's been on the rise for quite some time.

Mike Ravinsky: Participation in NCSY has been pretty evenly distributed between boys and girls, but girls predominate the leadership roles.

Casey Topol: In BBYO leadership is evenly split between boys and girls because our leadership model is based on gender-specific programming — much like a fraternity or a sorority system.

Katzew: In NFTY, the Reform movement youth organization, there are more girls who are members than boys. Nevertheless, in the recent past there have been examples in which the North American leadership was predominantly male.

Winick: Boys are stepping up to the plate less and girls are filling in because there are more spaces available; this is a different kind of cause and effect relationship. We've got a more open playing field in terms of leadership roles. I'm not convinced that young men have stepped away from leadership because more competent young women have stepped forward. We may see the pendulum shift again and we'll have to reformulate yet again.

Ravinsky: Girls are more mature than boys during the teen years. Boys are more drawn to physical activity and girls seem to be more organized, more giving, and more apt to be selfless and focused — qualities essential for leadership.

Topol: Social networking has significantly and adversely affected the way teens communicate. In college I was involved with Facebook when it first started. But today, Facebook, texting, and instant messaging offer immediate connection, and teens don't develop the patience to wait for a ring on a cell phone. I've noticed that teens are losing the social skills needed to talk to people and have real relationships. Youth groups and social networking outside of the online world help teens form those important relationships and build identities around each other and not just online or on Facebook.

Ravinsky: All human beings are social creatures, and whether we realize it or not we crave intense, deep relationships, which the social networking of electronic media does not provide. When teens get involved in our programming they experience an intimacy that they don't even realize they're missing. That intimacy is a tremendous magnet and growth force of our organizations.

Katzew: I wonder how this conversation compares to the conversations that people had about Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig when they were translating the Tanach and making it accessible. Fifty years from now people might feel very differently about the potential of linking people who otherwise would never have met each other, recognizing the value-added components of the linkages that are now possible. We have to find ways to take what certainly has the potential to do a great deal of damage to personal relationships and intimacy and turn it into

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Rabbi Mike Ravinsky serves as director of NCSY, the youth arm of the Orthodox Union; and the Jewish Student Union, an organization that engages unaffiliated teens through programming in public and private high schools throughout St. Louis. He also teaches in the Florence Melton program and serves as the community *mohel*.

Casey Topol is program associate for the New England Region of BBYO — a leading pluralistic Jewish teen movement. Previously, Casey worked for Hillel as a JCSC (Jewish Campus Service Corps) Fellow at the University of Florida.

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an asset for the community. In this area, teens are more advanced than the adults.

Topol: Social networking can connect people who have similar interests who wouldn't meet otherwise, but it shouldn't stop there. Just because you've "friended" someone on Facebook, doesn't mean it's an actual friendship. This can be hard for teens to realize and we need to work with them to build stronger and more meaningful relationships with their peers beyond the Internet.

Winick: Technology can be a programmatic anchor but it needs to be balanced. When I speak with parents of adolescent males, I'm hearing they cannot make social plans unless somebody contacts them over IM. These young people don't know how to craft a personal social life, though they may be online until 2:00 a.m. with their virtual social life. They also don't know how to make personal contacts as leaders and how to follow up. We're finding with younger staff that the concept of following up on an e-mail contact is great but following up with a personal call doesn't occur to them — they have to be pushed to make a call. We're in a unique place to exploit the benefits of virtual communities while simultaneously bringing people into the world of the real and helping them grow in interpersonal ways as well.

Katzew: *Strategy comes from two disciplines, war theory and game theory. What have been the effects of games — in particular games that are played solo, as well as games that bring together groups of people who otherwise are engaged in solo activities?*

Ravinsky: I've seen evidence of games having a tremendous impact on the personality and behavior of kids, more so on boys than girls. At our summer camp we had a debate among the administrative staff about whether we were going to have an Xbox room as a special treat for the campers. In my view, bringing electronics into camp is almost an oxymoron, and even though I'm the camp director, I lost the argument and we had X-Box and Halo and I was mortified with that decision. Games further alienate these kids, minimizing their ability to develop social skills, even if they're playing on the Internet with others.

Winick: Although our young people are able to discern between fantasy and reality in these games, I think that some games unfortunately reinforce stereotypes about women and neutralize the terror of violence.

Katzew: *What is your experience with single-sex learning environments?*

Ravinsky: Phenomenal. Boys aren't embarrassed to look stupid; they're willing to ask questions; they're willing to take risks; they don't have to be cool in front of the girls. They're also not distracted; they're actually focused on the learning rather than on the girl sitting next to them. And the girls aren't afraid to look smart, to challenge and question and go for the meat and potatoes. To watch the teens interact socially in a single-sex group versus the way the same teens interact in a coed group, is startling. There are exceptions, but same-sex groups are a much more meaningful experience in both realms.

We are nervous about creating too many leaders and not enough participants.

Katzew: *Are the students or teens pushing for same-sex learning environments? What about the parents of teens?*

Ravinsky: In the non-Orthodox world I'm getting interest from girls and their parents. The boys don't initially want same-sex programming. Once they're participating they're fine, but they worry it will be boring. In the Modern Orthodox world I catch hell. Any time I do something that's not coed I get raked over the coals that I'm too religious. At camp, the parents of the girls

Discussion Guide

Bringing together myriad voices and experiences provides Sh'ma readers with an opportunity in a few very full pages to explore a topic of Jewish interest from a variety of perspectives. To facilitate a fuller discussion of these ideas, we offer the following questions:

1. How might Jewish communities and educational opportunities reach out to boys without putting aside the needs of girls?
2. Do boys step back and away as girls step up into leadership roles?
3. As educators, what might be the impact on students of our unexplored gender biases and attitudes toward sexuality?

and the girls themselves are becoming less and less interested in coed activities.

Topol: BBYO has always had single-gender activities. And we all know that boys are different from girls, especially during adolescence. Allowing a platform for boys to engage in activities that are created specifically for them has proven to be very successful. They have a safe environment and an opportunity to engage in activities that are gender specific.

Winick: Though the students I work with would reject a single-sex model, once in that environment they find it very successful. Afterward, they'd say, "But we really don't want to do things in a single-sex model, even though it worked beautifully."

With more resources we could create more relationships with a greater impact. Otherwise, sometimes we're just a text-message invitation to an event.

Katzew: *Where do you see the teens who are aspiring to become leaders in Jewish life?*

Winick: Camps, as immersive experiences, are incubators for rabbinical schools. These experiences seem to play the greatest role in ongoing Jewish identity. While a lot of graduates of our program become rabbis, that's not our goal. We are nervous about creating too many leaders and not enough participants. We make it clear to our students that our focus is that they should embark on a compelling Jewish journey and that one can have a compelling Jewish journey that doesn't end up as a Jewish professional.


Ravinsky: When we build relationships with teens we're planting seeds. When they have a transformational experience, they have a tendency to want to share that with others. I was going to be a lawyer, but NCSY had a tremendous impact on increasing my level of obser-

vance and I felt an excitement and the responsibility to give back.

Katzew: *The biblical Joseph was smart to build up reserves during the years of plenty. Sadly we won't have to conjure up and imagine what it might be like to live at a time of financial distress. But if you had the resources, what is one thing that you would like to do with teens in your work?*

Winick: We'd place young rabbinic couples on campuses, offering a wonderful role modeling at a critical time in the development of Jewish identity.

Ravinsky: I'd use the resources to enable relationships. The more resources we have, the more relationships we can create and the greater impact we can have. Otherwise, sometimes we're just nothing more than a text-message invitation to an event.

Topol: In BBYO, teens pay for different events, so they run their own budget. I'd want to make our experiential learning and immersive experiences a lot more affordable. I feel that these are the types of programs that have the greatest impact on teens. 

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The Trouble with Boys

Peg Tyre (Crown Publishing, 2008, 320 pp, \$24.95)

REVIEWED BY MAX KLAU

If you are a parent, educator, clergy, or youth worker, you've almost certainly been wondering lately about boys. The anecdotal stories are everywhere: while the honor roll is 70 percent girls, the kids in detention are 70 percent boys; vast numbers of boys are diagnosed with ADHD or behavioral problems; far more girls than boys are signing up for youth groups, and applying to college (undergrad and beyond). Are boys really having trouble? If so, why? And what should we do about it?

In *The Trouble With Boys: A Surprising Report Card on Our Sons, Their Problems at School, and What Parents and Educators Must Do*, former *Newsweek* journalist Peg Tyre offers an insightful and provocative introduction to this important — and politically explosive — issue. The book is clear, well-researched, and chock full of stories and insights that are sure to leave you challenged, pensive, alarmed, and inspired.

Tyre begins with the facts. Her overview of relevant research eliminates any doubts about anecdotal stories. Boys are achieving less than girls in all subjects and in every grade level across the spectrum of socioeconomic status; and the gap is significant and growing.

Tyre does a great job of alternating between macrolevel statistics and microlevel tales from the front lines. She presents data describing the considerable gap between the literacy levels of boys and girls in elementary school, and then describes a classroom where a teacher is constantly chastising boys for being too fidgety and unfocused. She describes college attendance rates that are approaching 60 percent female/40 percent male, and then introduces us to a young man admitted into a particular college as part of a special program designed to even out the gender ratio. Is it fair that this underachiever got in when women with better grades were rejected? These are the questions that make any exploration of the trouble with boys so controversial.

Tyre offers a compelling explanation of the history that informs the heated debate. Not so long ago, girls achieved less than boys particularly in math and science. A generation of feminist scholars and activists fought long and hard to unravel systems of instruction and funding that privileged boys over girls. Although the

data suggest that feminists have succeeded beyond their wildest dreams at transforming schools into places that support female achievement, many remain committed to a stance that appears to be growing outdated.

Tyre repeatedly argues against a feminist notion that current efforts to address how schools fail boys represents an attempt to dismantle the hard-won gains made by girls. She believes that gender achievement is not a zero-sum game, in which every gain made by boys results in an equal loss by girls (and vice versa). Rather, she urges us to imagine win/win educational environments that support the success of all students.

Tyre does an impressive job of honoring the complexity of the issue. She explores recent findings from neurology, psychology, intriguing educational interventions like all-boy schools and all-boy classes in coed schools, and surprising cases of literacy and math instructional methods that have proven to work particularly well with boys. By debunking some popular trends (you may want to rethink Michael Gurian's work on the "minds of boys" after reading this) and highlighting promising practices (check out the Scottish septuagenarian's innovative literacy approach), Tyre brings much-needed clarity to a complicated debate.

Tyre notes that despite the overwhelming evidence that boys are falling behind, there is remarkably little research focused on rigorously exploring the problem — perhaps because of the controversial nature of the subject. Given the magnitude of the problem presented here, this status quo is clearly not acceptable.

Ultimately, however, Tyre is an optimist. In the past 30 years, feminists successfully transformed American education by insisting upon viewing educational practices through the lens of gender. No one can doubt that norms, values, funding patterns, and best practices in the world of education can be changed to more effectively ensure the academic achievement of an underperforming gender. The time has come to take on a new gender challenge; this work begins with a thoughtful, energetic, and informed national dialogue. With this important and insightful book, Peg Tyre has kick-started that discussion in a powerful way.

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Dr. Max Klau is director of leadership development at City Year, Inc. A developmental psychologist, he consults with an array of organizations on youth leadership education and gender and moral development.

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Gender and the Rabbinate

Sally Gottesman: *How has the gender ratio of your rabbinical school changed over the past decade?*

Mordecai Schwartz: While there has been some cyclical flux, JTS seems to continually come back to a balance of sexes that is quite close to 60 percent men, 40 percent women in the rabbinical school. But our commitment to addressing issues of gender and sexual identity goes beyond the numbers. The Jewish Women's Foundation of

heavily female, and some years heavily male. Overall though, the trend has been that there is no trend; the numbers tend to even out.

Gottesman: *Do you recruit specifically for a more balanced ratio in terms of students, faculty, and administration?*

Powers: A diverse student body and faculty have enhanced our educational experience. RRC is fully committed to admitting the best candidates to our rabbinic program and we would not compromise our standards by admitting less-qualified male applicants in order to create more gender balance. And it would not serve the Jewish people to turn away well-qualified female applicants. We've benefited greatly in all of our recruitment efforts from our long-standing reputation as a fully welcoming environment for all Jews committed to egalitarianism and feminism.

Schwartz: We at JTS do actively recruit women and we hope to increase the numbers of women in our rabbinical school. We would not, however, adopt a quota system.

Panken: At HUC we're opposed to a quota system; it would imply sacrificing quality students for specific gender counts. As for the administration and faculty, we likewise recruit scholars and leaders who are at the top of their fields, and we work to welcome women who might serve as important female role models to our students, the Reform movement, and the Jewish community at large.

Alexander: We now live in a time in Jewish history that demands powerful, bright, articulate, and passionate Jewish religious leaders. Our goal has always been to admit the most qualified candidates.

Zacharia: Our students are self-selecting and we do not recruit with gender in mind. Rather, we focus on candidates who are passionate about our program, who identify themselves as, and want to serve the Jewish community through, a pluralistic and transdenominational lens. We also have included transgender students in the mix. So we no longer look at gender through a binary breakdown; this, in fact, begins to make "gender" less important.

Gottesman: *Danny Boyarin has said the most important change in the last 100 years is that men and women are studying together. How has this affected either admissions to your school or the school itself?*

Men and women argue, for the sake of God, differently; they listen and speak to each other in different ways, and they handle themselves differently when their adrenaline starts to kick in.

New York has funded a project by Dr. Shira D. Epstein (see page 2) of the Davidson School of Jewish Education that is charged with naming the issues and initiating systemic change in the field of Jewish education by focusing Jewish educators on critical, unaddressed needs pertaining to gender.

Aaron Panken: With respect to students, HUC has admitted about ten percent more females than males in the last decade. Gender balance has varied over the past few years, but appears to be leveling off at 55:45 now. We expect that future classes will be more balanced genderwise. Of 20 new emerging scholars appointed to the faculty within the past fourteen years, half have been women. Our current chair, Barbara Friedman, is the first woman chair in the history of the board of governors of HUC-JIR. And our president, Rabbi David Ellenson, has inducted more than a dozen leading women philanthropists onto the board of governors during his tenure.

Amber Powers: RRC has about fifteen percent more female students than we had ten years ago, five percent more female faculty, 25 percent more women within the administration, and our board has added ten percent more women.

Sara Zacharia: Our rabbinical program at Hebrew College has only been in existence for six years, and our classes have maintained close to 50:50 men to women.

Aaron Alexander: The Ziegler School has remained mostly steady at about 60 percent men and 40 percent women since it began as a full ordination program. Of course fluctuation occurs; some years we begin with a class that is

Rabbi Aaron Alexander is assistant dean of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at American Jewish University. Rabbi Aaron Panken, PhD, serves as vice president for Strategic Initiatives at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR). Rabbi Amber Powers is dean of admissions and recruitment and a member of the faculty at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC). Rabbi Mordecai Schwartz is director of admissions at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) of America. Rabbi Sara Zacharia is admissions coordinator and *bet midrash* instructor at the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College. They spoke recently with Sally Gottesman, founder and president of the Eleemosynary Group, which consults to not-for-profit organizations. She is also co-founder and chair of the board of Moving Traditions.

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Alexander: We recently brought together the entire student body at the Ziegler School to talk about that question and a similar question — what it means for rabbis-in-training to engage in the study of *machloket*, disagreement, and how that impacts the way in which we speak to people once we leave our seminaries. What we've noticed is that it means something very different for men and women. Men and women argue, for the sake of God, differently; they listen and speak to each other in different ways, and they handle themselves differently when their adrenaline starts to kick in. Men are more comfortable with argument for the sake of argument — meaning, sitting down with the talmudic text and saying: it's not my job to necessarily prove that I'm right, but it's my job to prove that your

argument is wrong. And that often means not really listening to the other side. Women are more interested in the process and the discussion and less so in how the argument concluded. As a rabbinical school, we'd like people to be clearer about what the process of studying *machloket* can do for rabbis in the Jewish world.

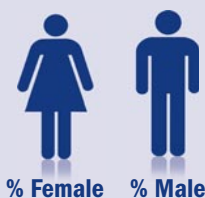
Zacharia: It doesn't impact admissions decisions, but rather decisions about curriculum and programming. When students choose their *chevrutah*, sometimes men are studying with men and women are studying with women, or it's all mixed up. Those study pairs become extremely close throughout rabbinical school. We ask our students to change it up, to not choose one person to study with for five years because that wouldn't take advantage of a variety of student learning styles. The *beit midrash* is the center of our program, so students are in the mode of *machloket* a minimum of two hours daily.

Schwartz: JTS has changed pretty radically since 1985 when the first woman was ordained. We used to run on a hierarchical, European graduate school model; we're less hierarchical now, more responsive to student needs. It's a warmer place. Is the admission of women to the rabbinical school responsible for that change? I think it probably had a major role in shifting the institutional culture. Boyarin is absolutely right that a major change in Judaism, as it's practiced, is the fact that men and women study together. This is true across the board, and also increasingly within the more liberal elements of Orthodoxy. Keeping women out of the central ritual of rabbinic and Jewish life — of rabbinic Judaism, which is engagement with God through the study of sacred texts — is history. What effect will this have? We don't yet know.

Panken: Sally Priesand, the first female rabbi ordained at HUC, acknowledged that the contemporary model of Jewish leadership has moved away from hierarchical leadership to empowering leadership. We must be careful not to be overly essentialist in our approach to the construction of gender. And yet we've seen ramifications of the models of leadership that women have put forth over the past few decades. For example, female scholars who teach in rabbinical seminaries demonstrate that the control of knowledge, the dissemination of knowledge, is not only a male thing. Women can and should be full partners in the creation and dissemination of knowledge. And women have taught us new ways of reading text, new lenses through which we can understand our inherited tradition.

Current Gender Ratio

in terms of
students, faculty,
administration,
and board



AJULA/Ziegler School:

	% Female	% Male
Students	40	60
Faculty	40	60
Administration	50	50
Board	45	55

Hebrew College:

	% Female	% Male
Students	50	50
Faculty	30	70
Advisory Board	16	84

HUC:

	% Female	% Male
Students	55	45
Faculty	35	65
Administration	35	65
Board	35	65

JTS:

	% Female	% Male
Students	37	63
Faculty	40	60
Rabbinical Adv. Board	18	81

RRC:


	% Female	% Male
Students	70	30
Faculty	56	44
Administration	85	15
Board	35	65

Gottesman: *At a recent conference on independent minyanim, the following statistic emerged: While women outnumber men in terms of participation, men outnumber women in leadership roles. Do you think that men have to be privileged — that is, leaders with special access — in order to remain part of the community?*

Panken: No. And yet we should re-examine the various sorts of leadership roles available to men in the community and assess how changes in our communities are impacting leadership styles. Women have made enormous progress in developing thoughtful models of leadership for this changed world. Men need to begin to thoughtfully craft new answers that turn away from traditional leadership roles that may not work as well.

Alexander: We don't believe men need to be privileged or have access to all the traditional power roles in the community. We do need our leadership to think creatively about religious programming so that it not only meets the needs of men and women, but also the elderly, singles, widows and widowers, to name a few. If we give voice and ownership on issues that matter, leadership roles will follow suit.

Powers: There is a growing crisis in progressive Jewish life concerning the engagement of boys and men. Many liberal and non-denominational Jewish organizations are struggling to recruit male candidates for a wide range of volunteer and paid roles — staff for camps and Hillel, religious school teachers, congregational lay leaders, post-college internship and fellowship programs. Most of our rabbinical students are products of those environments. We need to do more to actively engage boys and men, which will then increase the number of male candidates for the progressive rabbinate and other Jewish professional roles.

Zacharia: Men have had access to these roles throughout history. We must think broadly about sharing the vision of Jewish community, and inviting and encouraging both men and women to enter community through their leadership and participatory roles. I pray that one day the gender of the rabbi or lay leader does not matter — that all that matters is who is best suited for the particular position. 

The first woman ordained as a rabbi was Regina Joseph in Germany in 1935. Nearly 40 years passed until the Reform movement ordained Sally Priesand; the Reconstructionist movement ordained its first female rabbi in 1974; the Conservative movement in 1985. This edited Roundtable asked the admissions directors of non-Orthodox rabbinical schools about the gender of their applicant pool, about how women and men studying together influence the culture of the schools and rabbinic training; we spoke, hypothetically, about the future.

The admissions directors were generally sanguine about the future, yet they are insiders representing their schools. As an institutional outsider, I wonder what trajectory we, the Jewish people, are on. For example, all five directors were dismissive of "quotas" for male and female rabbinical students. I nevertheless ask: For clal Yisrael, should we work to ensure that both men and women are drawn to the rabbinate? Will the gender spectrum of rabbis — male, female, and transgendered — change how we think about the gender(s) of God? I also want to consider what Judaism would look like if the rabbinate were to become a "women's profession." After all, it was a men's profession for thousands of years — and the Judaism we practice is, in part, a result of that leadership. Stay tuned. —Sally Gottesman

Rescuing Bar/Bat Mitzvah

ED FEINSTEIN

Midrash associates the age of thirteen with four Biblical characters: Abraham was thirteen when he smashed his father's idols; Jacob and Esau were thirteen when they separated — Jacob to a life of Torah and Esau to the practice of idolatry. Thirteen was the age of Levi when he and his brother Simeon attacked the people of Shechem to avenge their sister. And thirteen was the age at which Bezalel gained the artistic skill to build the *mishkan*.

Each of these associations is deeply suggestive; together, they offer a glimpse of what bar/bat mitzvah might say to a growing teen. They offer a glimpse at how the bar/bat mitzvah rite might be rescued from the spiritual vacuity and deep vulgarity of contemporary practice.

Abraham: Bar/bat mitzvah is a time of holy rebellion. By age thirteen many children intuitively grasp that the narcissistic adulthood offered by much of American culture — and

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celebrated by the aptly named “American Idol” — is a dead end. They crave a sense of mission and ideals and hunger for a life of conscience. Bar/bat mitzvah is an invitation to counterculture; it offers a radically different adulthood — a life of mitzvah. Mitzvah is an act of self-transcendence, demanding that we stretch to become more than we are — more moral, more holy, more Godly. In doing a mitzvah, we discover that we matter. The paradox of mitzvah is that in performing a selfless act, we discover a bigger and better self. Abraham Joshua Heschel taught: “No one is lonely when doing a mitzvah, for mitzvah is where God and the human being meet. To meet God means to come upon an inner certainty of God’s realness, an awareness of God’s will.”

Jacob and Esau: Adolescence is about ambivalence — “me and my shadow.” The struggle toward identity is an awkward dance with two steps forward and one step backward. And the rite of bar/bat mitzvah says: “We’ll take you, anyway. We love you, nonetheless. We know your dark sides, your moods, your inconsistencies, your sins, and you’re still part of us. We don’t demand perfection. You matter. You matter to your family, to this community, to God.” Sometime or other, every teen departs from the family’s “master plan,” its stated and unstated expectations. The test of a family’s love is their resilience in finding a blessing for that child. S/he will cry, “Bless me too!” We must find the capacity to respond, “Come close so I can bless you.”

Levi is the zealot, the warrior, who is transformed into the priest, the teacher, the servant. Bar/bat mitzvah is about transformation. It ini-

tiates a thirteen-year cycle of transformation that follows us through life. What we need is not one, but a series of maturity rites, first at age thirteen, then at age 26, 39, 52, 65, 78. We deserve the opportunity, at each of these ages, to sit with a mentor/teacher for a period of learning and guided reflection on the progress of our lives — to recognize who has been important to us, to discover what drives us, to confront the fears that keep us stuck, and to recall the dreams yet unfulfilled. We deserve a time to envision new life scenarios, to forge a new vision of our life purposes and a new definition of personal success. And at the end, we would fashion a personal ritual for sharing and celebrating this moment of life transition with those we love. Imagine a synagogue so organized — inviting adults at regular intervals in life to become “*b’nai hochmah*” — bearers of life wisdom. How would it elevate the experience of thirteen-year-olds to recognize that their moment of celebration is unique because it is the first celebration in the great journey of Jewish adulthood?

Bezalel: Maturity is about practicality, realism, judicious rationality. But it must also include a measure of dreams. To build a dwelling place for God in the world is the soul’s dream. The bar/bat mitzvah must be encouraged to dream big. With all their worldliness, sense of invincibility, and media savvy, it is surprising how small the dreams of our children are. They, who grew up in a culture bereft of real moral heroes and in times of shrinking possibilities, suffer from underdeveloped moral imagination and malnourished idealism. Let bar/bat mitzvah invite them to dream. 



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The opinions expressed in *Sh'ma* do not necessarily reflect those of the editors.

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Donations to *Sh'ma* are tax deductible.

Sh'ma is available in **microfilm** from University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, Mich.,

and in **audio format** from the Jewish Braille Institute.

Address all **editorial correspondence** to *Sh'ma*, P.O. Box 9129, Newton, MA 02464. Telephone: 617-581-6810. Email: sberrin@JFLmedia.com.

Send all **subscription queries** and address changes to *Sh'ma*, P.O. Box 439, Congers, NY 10920-0439. Telephone: 877-568-SHMA. Email: shma@cambeywest.com.

Subscriptions: \$49/2 years in U.S.; \$29/1 year; \$59/2 years international; \$39/1 year international; \$21.97 for one year senior/student. Bulk subscriptions are available at reduced prices. Please notify the subscription office in writing if you prefer that your name not be given out on rented lists.

Sh'ma is **published** by JFL Media monthly except July and August. Application to mail at periodical-class postage rates pending at Newton, MA 02464.

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ISSN: 0049-0385 February 2009. WITH ALL SPONSORSHIPS, *SH'MA* RESERVES COMPLETE EDITORIAL CONTROL OF CONTENT.

February 2009/Sh'vat 5769

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Whether conveyed by a rabbi, a rapper, or a schoolyard rival, all boys in this culture must contend with commonly held — and frequently detrimental — masculine gender role expectations. What the psychologist William Pollack calls “the Boy Code” means learning to feel ashamed of one’s vulnerability and hiding the deep desire for connection behind a veneer of cool control. If, as Rabbi Ilai suggests, a man is measured by his ability to drink, we might be especially concerned for affluent boys; suburban teen boys demonstrate significantly higher rates of substance use than their urban peers and appear to use drugs and alcohol to self-medicate for anxiety and depression, rather than as mere adolescent experimentation. The true cost of patriarchy, and of the gender regimes it imposes, is that it restricts men and women, boys and girls, from access to the full range of human emotional experience: strength and vulnerability, pleasure and pain, independence and interdependence. Yet it is within our power as parents, peers, and leaders, to create new measures for our children that honor and encourage the richness of each human life.

—Beth Cooper Benjamin

As a resident in 1995 of the Kripalu Center in Lenox, Mass., I participated with seven other men in a play, “Beneath the Armor.” The brainchild of a female staff member with an extensive theatre background and a deep curiosity about the inner lives of men, this experience forced each of us to confront our past and then take a risk: make ourselves known and seen. Anger, sadness, joy, and laughter freely intermingled. At the play’s conclusion we shared a realization that as men and women we were long overdue to heal our relationships. As much as this was a formative experience for me, I have often wondered why it

happened outside of a Jewish framework.

How many Jewish men and boys today live Thoreau’s “quiet lives of desperation”? Have we as men unwittingly modeled unhealthy ways for our sons to become Jewish men? Have we pursued reliance on the cup, the pocket, and often inappropriate anger directed at how we’re portrayed to the outside world, to our loved ones, and to ourselves? As a consultant and mentor to Jewish youth professionals, I witness the struggle in the field to engage Jewish boys and allow Judaism’s values and teachings to be relevant to boys’ experiences of life. It is a struggle wherein we have no choice but continue.

—David Goldstein

R. Ilai said: By three things is a man known: By his cup, by his pocket, and by his anger. And there are those who say: Also by his laughter.

Eruvin 65b

Identity often takes a back seat to identification: we are who others see us to be. In contemporary times, determining what it means to be a man can take place only if we know what it means to live as part of a larger society. As it was for the rabbis, modern man is known by what he drinks and how much money he has, but it is the way he expresses his anger that tells us most about who he “really is.” While any man can be known in these ways, it should be the goal of Jewish men to be known, instead, for their laughter. To be a Jewish man should be to focus less on Buber’s “It” and more on his “Thou,” looking to build deep relationships with other people, not just other things. Victor Borge once said that “laughter is the shortest distance between two people.” If Jewish men could take more time to laugh with those for whom they care the most, we might be able to forge a more meaningful identity as individuals committed to being in relationship. In so doing, we might become real men — real *menschen*.

—Rabbi Isaac Saposnik

role-play, and many other techniques. Instead of suppressing or denying anger, he points to *Pirke Avot* (5:11 II), which teaches us that the highest level one can achieve is to be someone who is slow to anger and easily appeased. (Pliskin, page 47) Perhaps through the easing of anger we can move toward more laughter and model a better path for our young men.

—Owen Gottlieb

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February 2009/Sh’vat 5769
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Yehudah Mirsky, Fellow at the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem

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This year our Sigi Ziering column focuses on the ethics of homelessness. Each month an esteemed guest columnist wrestles with what Jewish texts and our interpretive tradition teach us about the parameters, and limits, of Jewish responsibility to those without shelter. The column is sponsored by Bruce Whizin and Marilyn Ziering in honor of Marilyn's husband, Sigi Ziering, of blessed memory. Visit shma.com to view the series of columns with responses, as well as a series of paintings by artist Pat Berger on the homeless of Los Angeles.

Jacob Montgomery is a high school junior in Medford, NJ. While in PanimWorks: DC JAM, a program of PANIM: The Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values, he spent last summer volunteering in a pre-school for children living in shelters and transitional housing. This essay won a Sh'ma-PANIM competition among PANIM alumni responding to a question about how an individual, personally, addresses homelessness on the street.

Responsibility

JACOB MONTGOMERY


After one spends time in Washington D.C. and Philadelphia, the sight of homeless people in American cities becomes normal, just one of the more unpleasant aspects of urban life. Seeing people sleeping in parks and on benches becomes an ordinary sight, one that doesn't seem disturbing or unusual. However, as Jews and as human beings, we have a responsibility to see the humanity in every single person and to take action to improve the lives of other people. We are all created in the image of God, and therefore, no one should have to sleep outside on a cold evening or go without food for an entire day. There are two approaches we should take to lessen the severity of homelessness: do small acts of kindness and better utilize our government to solve problems.

All human beings have pride and have some sense of self-value. However, when one is forced to beg for food and to live on the street, these feelings are weakened. When I walk by a homeless person in the street, it is important to keep that person's humanity and sense of self in mind. If I treat that person with the respect and the dignity that I, myself, would like to be treated with, I know I can increase the possibility of having a positive impact on that person's life. Simply smiling and saying hello can be a great thing for a homeless person to hear. When combining these acts of common courtesy with a small donation, such as some food or clothing, I can make an individual's life just a bit better. Sometimes, a few encouraging words or a

few shirts and pairs of socks help a homeless person survive a little longer.

As a person living comfortably within a stable family, I feel responsible to help a person who does not have what I have, whose life is a struggle. Americans often have the mindset that we don't give up anything we own, and that each man should fend for himself. Some people hold onto their wealth, feeling that the less fortunate can improve their own lives; they don't feel an obligation toward the lives of people who had the misfortune of being born into poverty. But I know many people are given comfortable lives by circumstance, by being born into affluent families.

In the book of Genesis we are told that we are all created in the image of God, but these words only have meaning if we act on them. By helping the homeless one person at a time, we are affirming our belief in the divinity of each human and acting more divine ourselves.

Lobbyists for large oil corporations and healthcare insurance companies tend to reinforce the way our government ignores America's poor. There are no paid lobbyists for homeless people; we must be their advocates. The problem of homelessness is important for everyone, because we, too, might be but one bad decision or one unlucky break away from being homeless ourselves. It is the responsibility of every single person living a comfortable life to try to make the lives of the less fortunate comfortable as well. This is our responsibility as Jews and as human beings. 

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