

Where the Boys Are

Over the past several decades, the Jewish community has succeeded in making Judaism more girl-friendly, but these efforts have left some teens behind.

By **Rahel Musleah**

Robert Riemer, 16, went reluctantly to the first meeting of Shevet Achim: The Brotherhood at his synagogue. The program for ninth-grade boys at Larchmont Temple in New York advertised itself as a place to explore what it means to be a Jewish man. “After my bar mitzva, I decided not to do any Jewish things,” Riemer says. “But my parents wanted me to give it a shot.”

The group leader, Andrew Paull, 24, admits that marketing the program was difficult, but once the eight boys began participating, they happily returned. At each meeting, physical activities alternated with discussion. A session about power and strength featured an obstacle course and fitness activities; one on rules centered on a basketball game.

“The gender-based programming separates it from other activities for Jewish boys,” says Paull, the synagogue’s youth coordinator. More girls than boys had been participating in the synagogue’s youth groups. “The focus in youth groups is community and relationships. You talk about what you learn and feel. Boys are taught if it’s not sports, it’s not fun.”

SHEVET ACHIM, A PROGRAM FOR eighth- and ninth-grade boys with 33 groups in 7 cities, is a centerpiece of the Campaign for Jewish Boys launched by Moving Traditions (www.movingtraditions.org), a nonprofit organization that frames Jewish activities through a gendered lens. Moving Traditions’ girls-only group, Rosh Hodesh: It’s a Girl Thing!, has attracted 10,000 girls since 2002. Funders of the Campaign for Jewish Boys include the UJA-Federation of New York, Jew-



Getting Involved Participants in a pilot Shevet Achim group in New York.

ish Federation of Greater Philadelphia, Rose Community Foundation, the Lasko Family Foundations and the Covenant Foundation.

According to a three-year study for Moving Traditions conducted by the Center for the Study of Boys’ and Girls’ Lives, only 17 percent of boys participate in Jewish education by 12th grade—one-third fewer than girls. Boys who remain involved say they are dissatisfied with activities they call “stale” and “preachy.” Putting developing masculinity at the cen-

ter of Jewish programming with a male facilitator kept more boys engaged.

“As they set their identities, having the chance to meet with other boys to explore being male is deeply engaging,” says Michael Reichart, executive director of the center.

“It’s good to have Jewish guys that you can hang out with,” notes Tom Benamram, a 10th grader who takes part in a Shevet Achim group at B’nai Jeshurun synagogue in New York. “I knew the other guys in the group a little bit, but now I feel like we are

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friends. Even when we talked about [an] *X-Men* movie or some other Jewish-related pop culture thing it was good to talk to someone who understands me and how I think about the world.”

THE DROP-OFF OF BOYS AFTER BAR mitzva has deep implications, says Rabbi Daniel Brenner, director of Moving Traditions’ Initiatives for Boys and Men. “Unless we start engaging the next generation...Judaism for men will be called Orthodoxy and for women will be called liberal Judaism,” he says. Women’s involvement in all areas of life is causing men to ask, “Where do I fit in?” “Young men ...don’t see men active in the community in the way they see women being active, so they think, ‘I guess this is not a men’s thing.’ That’s the real challenge.”

The name *Shevet Achim: The Brotherhood* is not only familiar from the

liturgical song “*Hineh Mah Tov*” (How good it is for brothers to dwell together in unity), but also evokes a Hasidic tradition where men gather to share stories, study, play and eat. “The model of *shevet achim*—small gatherings where a teacher builds ongoing community with a group of men—is the one that we are evoking with our program for teen boys,” says Brenner.

“Men’s decreased interest in Jews and Judaism walks hand-in-hand with apathy toward creating Jewish households and raising Jewish children as well as lower levels of Jewish education...,” asserts a 2008 study on gender imbalance in American Jewish life by Sylvia Barack Fishman, codirector of the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute, and Daniel Parmer, also of the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute.

Fishman recommends that both synagogues and Jewish organizations “find new ways to balance the moral principles of egalitarianism with the

psychosocial needs of boys and men.”

Though few organizations are articulating the problem and solution as specifically as Moving Traditions, “everyone is dealing with this issue,” says David Bryfman, director of the New Center for Collaborative Leadership at the Jewish Education Project in New York (formerly the Board of Jewish Education—SAJES). “In most non-Orthodox environments trying to engage teenagers—youth groups, camps, Israel trips—girls outnumber boys. [And] teen issues don’t command priority on the Jewish agenda.” Yet addressing the problem requires walking a fine line: “While we are decrying the lack of women in the top echelons of Jewish leadership, we are simultaneously confronting the contrasting issue: the feminization of youth-oriented programs. It muddies the waters.”

Though it is not a direct service organization, JEP is regularly consulted



on how to attract more boys. “We try to impart that the solution is rarely one of marketing and communications alone,” says Bryfman. “There are often much deeper issues, including who the role models are and what type of activities are being offered.”

Two years ago, the Union for Reform Judaism created the 6 Points Sports Academy camp in Greensboro, North Carolina, to appeal to kids who would not otherwise attend a Jewish camp. “We also hoped the camp would attract a lot of boys,” says Paul Reichenbach, URJ director of camping and Israel programs.

In fact, 90 percent of 6 Points campers had not attended Jewish overnight camp before and 65 to 70 percent are boys. “We’re creating a paradigm for boys to have fun in a Jewish setting,” adds Reichenbach. 6 Points was developed with the support of the Jim Joseph Foundation and the Foundation for Jewish Camp. URJ’s 13 camps (and its high school Israel trip) are upping the sports and the adventure elements to be more boy-friendly.

“When I play baseball with the boys and later I’m their bar mitzva tutor—it really gels,” says Rabbi Andy

“This program called to my sense of leadership,” says Paull. “Working with boys feels like I’m doing

According to a three-year study, only 17 percent of boys in 12th grade are still taking part in Jewish education—a third fewer than girls.

Koren, a faculty member at 6 Points. He has also introduced Shevet Achim and Rosh Hodesh: It’s a Girl Thing! into the Sunday school curriculum at his synagogue, Temple Emanuel in Greensboro.

MOVING TRADITIONS IS FOCUSING on training male educators who are themselves looking for a place to merge Judaism and masculinity. Some group leaders (all volunteers) are professional Jewish educators, but others are public school teachers, lawyers, pediatricians, artists—anyone who wants to reinvigorate their connections to the community, says Brenner.

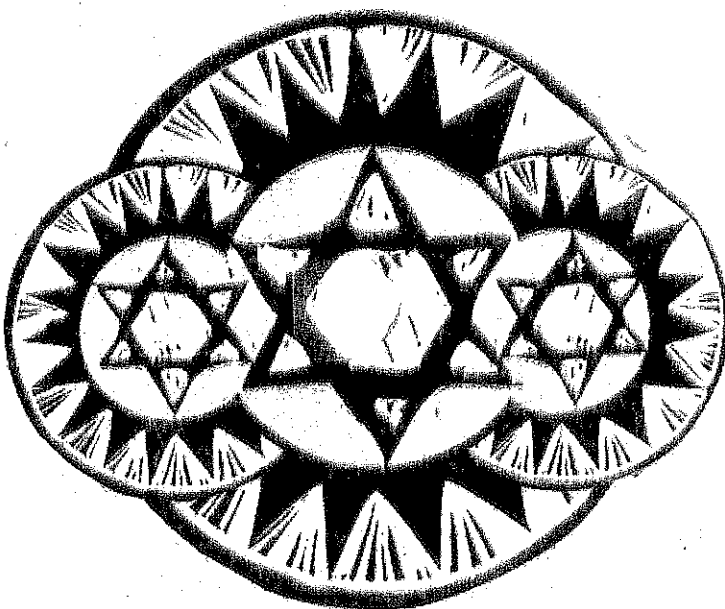
activities from my cabin at camp.”

Brenner, too, knows firsthand the importance of role models. A native of Charlotte, North Carolina, he grew up with few other Jews in his school. “I would not have learned what it means to be a Jewish man were it not for the male mentors I had at Jewish camps,” he says.

Mason Voit, 39, who leads two Shevet Achim groups, credits his Young Judea experience in Mobile, Alabama, for his connection to Judaism. A former public school history teacher, Voit is director of education and Jewish family life at Conservative Synagogue Adath Israel in Riverdale, New York. “Boys appreciate when men have honest conversations about what it’s like to be a man,” he says. “What is masculinity? How is being a Jewish man different? What are the messages from our society and tradition? How do we communicate that we care about others? These issues are complex and in flux.”

Riemer’s role models include his father, who is the president of Larchmont Temple’s men’s club; his 21-year-old brother; and President Obama. While he is critical of his Hebrew school experience, he says he has “thought some good things about Judaism. I feel Jews are very close and family and education are very important. I knew these things before, but Shevet Achim makes me think about it more.”

Benamram feels his Shevet Achim group encouraged him to think about



things like ridicule. “[Boys] are always making fun of each other,” he says. “I realized that we do this because we are uncomfortable. Then I started to think about the word ‘thick-skinned’—how as a man you are supposed to be thick-skinned, to not care about what people say. That is messed up. Sometimes you do care.”

When ninth-grader Aaron Gottesfeld joined the group at B’nai Jeshurun, he says he “took it with a grain of salt. I thought, ‘guy’ stuff can’t be too deep.” But he found that alongside playing stickball, the group discussed the expectations that they must be tough and unafraid. “When guys are around other guys in school they try hard to be something that they aren’t.... In the group, we talked about listening, and what it means for guys to listen to each other. It doesn’t sound cool, but it actually was. We talked about Reb Zusya, and how he needed to be himself. I remember that story more than some of the other ones. It was about how what it means to be Jewish is connected to what it means to be true to yourself....”

“In egalitarian circles, we are fearful of male-only programming because for so long our tradition has been exclusively male-led,” says Rabbi Jesse Olitzky, who was a Shevet Achim leader at Orangetown Jewish Center in New York before moving to Jacksonville, Florida. The boys in his group, Olitzky says, exposed the weights they were carrying: stress to succeed in school, issues at home with parents, fears about divorce, struggles with friendship and pressure to act cool and prove they are heterosexual.

Brenner notes that researchers outside the Jewish community are also investigating the life of adolescent boys. “Boys are told their primary role should be in a romantic relationship with a girl,” he explains. Cultural messages also emphasize independence and downplay male friendships.

PARENTS, SAYS VOIT, ARE AWARE OF the issues and want the conversations to be held in a Jewish context. Donna Lefkowitz, mother of 12-year-old Gabe from Great Neck, New York, worries that the Jewish educational system “doesn’t capture the boys.... Prayer and sitting are difficult.” She suggests more male role models like the Israeli *shlichim*—scouts and soldiers—that Gabe met at Sprout Lake, a Young Judaea camp. “They represent independence and strength. He likes to be part of a team and feel athletic and capable.”

“I like when you do something fun and then apply it to Judaism,” says Gabe.

Jessica Braginsky, mother of four boys ages 12 to 21, recalls her oldest son attending a social action program, Panim, at which he connected to one counselor. “He saw that you could be cool and into your Judaism,” she says. Her husband’s strong bond to Judaism also provides an example. “What they all like is the facts, the rigor, the study.” Braginsky, principal of Limud, the religious school of Con-

gregation Tifereth Israel in Glen Cove, New York, notes that some educational curricula “ask a lot of questions about how you feel about this or that. Boys are not much into that.”

The archetypes of American masculinity may have changed somewhat, says Brenner, but being a Jewish man requires its own exploration. “A Jewish man is supposed to be a mensch, smarter than the average man but also tough after the Shoah and the founding of Israel, responsible for the protection of the Jewish people. The messages don’t necessarily fit together. The role of educators is to be able to see the multiple layers and envision the integration.

“Not enough synagogues are asking their bar mitzva boys to say, ‘Today I am a man,’” he adds. “Bar mitzva has become neutered of gender. It should be about manhood as a bar mitzva and womanhood as a bat mitzva. Both have been conflated into *b’nei mitzva* about Jewish identity.” H

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