

Jewish Teens Are Adolescents Too

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Although the central purpose of Jewish youth programs is to strengthen the Jewish identity and Jewish loyalties of teens, we dare not ignore the entire persona of the teenager participating in our groups and programs. When an emerging young adult chooses to join a Jewish group or attend an event, her/his goals and concerns are not simply to be a more “Jewish” person. Each teen is there in response to some inner need, which may emanate either from a contemporary societal concern or from a deeper psychosocial motive. If we aspire to helping Jewish teens become contributing members of the Jewish community, then we must help them become capable adults as well as good Jews.

Factors in Adolescent Development

Adolescence has been characterized in many ways, but the most obvious is dramatic growth along several dimensions. There are profound physical changes, including height and weight. There are internal and external biological changes, including the development of secondary sex characteristics. There is, in most cases, significant cognitive development that becomes evident in the increased ability of teenagers to comprehend complex ideas and concepts and form reasoned opinions and judgments. And finally, there occurs a social and emotional development that includes the evolution of strong concepts of self and the ability to form and sustain relationships with others, especially the opposite sex. These phenomena are familiar to, if not understood in any great detail by, the professionals who work with Jewish teens and anyone who has raised a teenager. The impact of these changes on Jewish programs and services for teens has never been fully articulated.

To be sure, Jewish family services have teen clients who are struggling through some of these changes. But only those teens who are experiencing serious difficulty in school, family or social relationships are likely to seek these professional services. The vast majority of Jewish teens move through these developmental challenges with enough adult and peer support to preclude the need for professional help. Youth workers, however, should be able to differentiate between teens whose problems are more or less normal and those whose problems are profound enough to warrant referral.

Another consideration in adolescent development is the natural transitions that teens pass through. Many writers and thinkers have pointed out that the stage of adolescence gets longer and longer from generation to generation. Some believe it begins as early as age 10 and can last well into the early 20s. Some of the more significant transitions are the moves from elementary to middle school, from middle school to high school and from high school to college. Other, less obvious, transitions are *bar/bat mitzvah*, confirmation and obtaining a driver’s license. Youth workers are well aware that teens do not interact very well across transitional stages. The pace of change in the areas mentioned above can be so dramatic that two or three years in age can seem like decades in developmental terms.

Adolescent Development as Reflected in Behavior

In attempting to incorporate support for adolescent development in Jewish youth programming, it may be useful to examine adolescence from the perspective of the behavior of teens. I have found it useful to break down teen behavior into five categories: achievement, acceptance authority, autonomy and

activity. These may not be entirely discrete, but they are sufficiently divergent to include diverse behaviors.

Achievement is the desire to be good at something and the commitment to practice until mastery is acquired. At the onset of adolescence, one's natural talents and abilities may not be fully evident or appreciated. As the journey through adolescence progresses, they become clearer, both to the individual and to others. Confirmation of success by others is evidence of achievement and reinforces the desire for greater excellence in the particular skill or ability. In time, adolescents often find themselves gravitating to peers who share the same interest in achievement. It does not matter from a developmental perspective what the particular area of achievement is, i.e., sports, arts, academics, writing, etc. The critical need is to be good at something.

Achievement can lead to acceptance, but is not necessarily related. Adolescents need and seek recognition and approval. At the beginning of adolescence, adults are still the major validators of acceptance. As the adolescent gets older, peers and, ultimately, the opposite sex become more important. This is more than simple popularity. True acceptance is satisfying only when it can embrace both the positive and the negative qualities of the individual. To be accepted for one's strengths alone is conditional, but it is the desire for unconditional acceptance, or love, that motivates the adolescent. Because of the great need for acceptance, adolescents often succumb to peer pressure. When a particular individual is so driven by the need for acceptance that independent judgments of right and wrong are suspended, intervention is necessary.

Authority is the desire for power and is closely related to achievement and acceptance. This is not the same as leadership, although teen leaders are more driven by the need for authority than those characterized as followers. Authority means having some degree of control over one's life and some degree of respect from others. This need does not emerge strongly in behavioral terms for most adolescents until high school, but it is present early in the process. Concerns about physical appearance are a manifestation of authority.

Autonomy is the desire for independence and for making decisions for oneself. Our society provides more choices for everyone, including adolescents. Making decisions can be almost overwhelming when all the options appear attractive. Although teens are interested in the opinions of adults and peers, ultimately they insist on making their own decisions. Even when their decision is exactly what parents expected and encouraged, teens typically insist that the decision was their own.

Activity is the desire to be doing something almost all the time. Teens are often characterized as explorers, as they are always trying something new. This is particularly true of younger teens, who have not yet experienced much or tested themselves against reality. But even older teens claim to be extremely busy, albeit devoting more hours to a limited number of activities. Most teens, however, do not earn money for reasons of achievement, and most do not measure status today by wealth. Money is the tool that permits teens to engage in favorite activities, either alone or with friends. Thus earning money, or working, becomes an enabling activity, but an activity nonetheless.

Jewish Programming for Adolescents

The challenge for Jewish youth work is to interweave the dimensions of adolescent development and the goal of fostering Jewish values and Jewish loyalty. One approach is to create programs that address these challenges directly; for example, a program on dating issues and behavior or a program on peer pressure. Adolescents generally enjoy these programs because they involve real issues in their lives, and they want validation from others for their problems and concerns. The typical approach to this type of program is to form a panel of experts, both professionals and youth, and to include the rabbi or other knowledgeable Jew for "the Jewish perspective." A more creative approach is to involve the teens themselves in problem solving by constructing scenarios and providing resources from a variety of perspectives that can be brought to bear in dealing with the scenarios. But this approach is limited in that it offers a one-shot fix for issues that continue over a longer period of time.

The preferred approach to helping adolescents with developmental issues is to plan continuing program threads throughout the year that revisit the same set of issues through different lenses and perspectives. I am a proponent of expressive activities for teens, activities in which teens are challenged to create something original to explain a theme or concern. I also believe that community service offers an excellent opportunity to integrate many adolescent developmental needs and Jewish communal objectives. However, these approaches only accomplish the broader objectives when repeated regularly. For instance, a single visit annually to the food pantry, though worthwhile, does not address continuing developmental needs. Longer term projects or activities can be worthwhile when planned appropriately.

In this regard, reflection, a tool applied widely in adult learning, is particularly relevant to Jewish youth programs. Every program should include time to reflect on how participants felt during the activity and what they learned about themselves as a result. I would argue that this applies to dances, as well as serious programs.

Jewish Youth Groups and Jewish Youth Programs

A youth group is an organization that provides programs and activities for its members. Although many Jewish teens belong to youth groups, there are more who do not. Typically, youth groups seek continuing, regular attendance throughout the year by the same people. In terms of adolescent development, youth groups are only addressing the needs of a limited group. It is difficult for any youth group, no matter how numerous its members, to provide varied, continuing activities that meet the needs of large numbers of teens. Moreover, being a member of any group at all is not generally viewed favorably by adolescents until they reach high school age, at which point it is more about building one's resume than identifying with the goals and objectives of the group. Jewish youth groups typically have no greater objectives than those of affording members the opportunity to participate regularly and of integrating a certain amount of Jewish content where possible.

Youth programming, on the other hand, is less about belonging and more about addressing specific needs of Jewish youth. Organizations that seek to engage larger numbers of Jewish teens will certainly offer

youth groups, but will also offer continuing programs in a variety of areas that allow teens to meet more of their developmental needs. Large congregations, for example, can offer drama groups, sports clubs, community service projects, arts festivals and other programs without diminishing the youth group. Communities interested in attracting more teens certainly can delegate specific program focuses to the agencies best equipped to organize and administer them. Agencies with program skills should use consultants knowledgeable in adolescent development issues to help plan programs to meet the multiple needs of Jewish teens.

Conclusion

In this era of greater concern about program effectiveness for the best allocation of limited resources, it appears that strategies with greater focus are required. It makes sense to fuse adolescent development needs together with Jewish programming for teens, both in terms of resources and as a marketing strategy. Providing opportunities for Jewish teens to meet developmental needs also may make the normal stresses of adolescence easier and reduce the number of teens who are unable to cope effectively. In the long run, it is easier to prevent dysfunction than it is to reverse it.

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