

## Art Works for Teens: Connecting Jewish Learning to Students' Lives by Debbie Krivoy

It's a brisk fall morning in October, and fifteen high school students and I are standing in front of The Jewish Museum on Fifth Avenue in New York City. We've come together for a video arts program called "Through the Lens of Sukkot." Students receive digital video cameras, tripods, blank tapes, sketchbooks, and pencils. Working in small groups, they are preparing to shoot a ten-minute video that captures their unique perspective about the holiday.

Students spent the early part of the day with teaching artist, Nurit Newman. A working sculptor and video artist, Nurit had recently been featured in the Guggenheim Museum's Film and Video Festival. She introduced students to Sukkot-related themes in the work of contemporary Jewish artists. Together, they looked at Allan Wexler, whose sukkah installations blur the lines between architecture and sculpture. They looked at Andy Goldsworthy's nature sculpture, Tobi Kahn's meditative spaces, and Merle Ukeles' urban landfill projects.

The work of these artists evoked the themes of shelter, harvest, water, fragility and memory. It was October 2001 — just a month after the tragedy of September 11. The ideas of "fragile structures" and "sacred space" resonated in a profound way with these students, all of whom lived in Manhattan.

Preparing for the video assignment, students huddled over their storyboards with palpable excitement — swapping ideas and delegating tasks. And then, they were off. A complete urban landscape was theirs for the taking: sprawling Central Park, the gritty city streets, rose gardens, and elegant apartment buildings of the Upper East Side.

### Another Way of Telling

The first group went to the park and shot footage of a juggler practicing with bowling pins. In their video, a girl's voice-over discussed the joyful, celebratory nature of Sukkot. She explained that during the time of the Second Temple, Sukkot was an intense celebration often expressed through dancing, music — and juggling.

In the spirit of the seven usphizin, guests who are invited into the sukkah, the second group conducted seven street interviews along Madison Avenue. To these teens, Sukkot was about feeling safe in a structure outside of the home. So soon after September 11, their interview questions focused exclusively on feelings of safety.

The third group bought a dozen lemons at a corner market, and arranged them in a pile of leaves and twigs on the grass. Taking a more conceptual approach, the group talked stream-of-consciousness about the sights and smells of Sukkot, while the camera lingered on a close-up shot of this colorful bounty pile.

On that October morning, film proved to be an excellent medium for communicating complex concepts and emotions. The thought, intellect, and passion these high school students poured into the project enabled their previous learning about Sukkot to come alive. The video camera became a powerful learning tool, indelibly etching ideas and emotions in students' minds.

### Working with Teens: A Developmental Approach

Teens are a study in contrasts. They want to belong, and they want to be fiercely independent. They yearn for change, yet often cling to what they know. Amidst a flood of emotional and physical changes, adolescence and young adulthood is a critical time for making choices — including choices about Jewish identity.

Four years ago, in a large-scale study of Jewish teens, the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University painted a complex picture of the attitudes and behaviors of today's Jewish adolescents. Researchers confirmed what many of us already knew: Jewish involvement declines steadily after age 13. In response to such striking patterns of disenfranchisement, the report stressed the importance of finding entry points into Jewish teenagers' social networks, providing teens with a sense of personal reward, and creating "possibilities for treating adolescents more like adults."<sup>1</sup>

These findings build on theories of adolescent development and on the growing body of research about the ways young people learn, communicate and understand the world.<sup>2</sup> As Jewish teens struggle with their developing concepts of who they are and who they might become, it is important to recognize their need for the following:

- Self-definition: Teens need time to reflect upon what it means to be Jewish, and time to consider themselves not just as observers, but as participants in society. Jewish educators can help by creating learning experiences that provide a "mirror" to teens' lives.
- Personal expression: Teens are discovering new interests and abilities. They are also discovering new feelings, thoughts, and concerns about themselves and the world around them. Jewish educators can help by providing teens with opportunities and venues to express these new interests, thoughts, and emotions in a creative way.
- Meaningful participation: Teens need to participate in activities that shape their evolving Jewish lives. As they develop more sophisticated social and intellectual skills, teens are hungry to use their newfound talents to wrestle with real issues and problems. Jewish educators can help by providing opportunities for teens to be active participants in the community.
- Valued interactions: Teens are enormously influenced by the people with whom they interact, as well as the types of experiences they have in Jewish life. Jewish educators can help by providing a range of mentoring opportunities and interactions with accomplished professionals.

### Bridging the Divide: The Role of the Arts

Judaism must have a creative, personally relevant component if it is to make a lasting impact on adolescents. As such, educators must be committed to providing a wide range of vibrant, substantive learning experiences to connect with Jewish teens.

I advocate for the use of the arts in most learning settings, but I am especially interested in using such an approach with teenagers. The arts are nurturing, empowering, and challenging experiences — and they yield deep learning. Moreover, the arts embody the critical dimensions so integral to adolescent development: They foster creative expression, build critical thinking skills, and provide a range of ways for students to access content. This is a medium that provides a deeply personal and developmentally appropriate learning environment for teens. It's been said that "teenagers are willing to draw and create art as freely as they resist talking to adults."<sup>3</sup>

Students have very positive associations with the arts. In a 2003 study by Harris Interactive, 79% of students between the ages of 8-18 said their favorite activities involved the arts. Seven in 10 students said that art, music, dance and theater make the world a better place to live.<sup>4</sup> For purposes of this article, I am defining the arts in the broadest sense to include visual arts (painting, drawing, and sculpture), media arts (photography, film, and digital imaging), performing arts (music, theater, and dance), and literary arts (creative writing and poetry).

The arts provide a wealth of opportunities to help adolescents understand and accept the new people they are becoming.

A comment I hear from teens all the time is that art helps them express themselves in ways that they normally can't. When students engage with the arts, they feel good, they feel competent, and they tap into their imaginative Jewish selves.

### Avoda Arts: Fusing Creativity and Jewish Learning

Avoda Arts is a cultural and educational organization that offers teenagers and young adults a creative understanding of Judaism through the arts. Conceived in 1999 as an opportunity to bring a fresh and artistic perspective to Jewish learning, the program appeals to Jewish students who are interested in the arts, but less interested in their Jewish identity.

At Avoda, we integrate arts-based learning with the powerful young adult impulses for self-identity and the search for personal values. By exploring the aesthetic expression of Jewish tradition, students are encouraged to use a variety of artistic means to define their own links to Jewish practice and values. Programs include traveling exhibitions, artist residencies, semester-long courses, student film festivals, hands-on workshops, custom curriculum design, and professional development for educators. To date, Avoda has worked with more than 7,500 high school and college age students around the country.

The organizing principles of Avoda Arts are grounded in well-established learning theories, which focus primarily on a student-centered approach:

- Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, which allows for multiple access points for learning.<sup>5</sup>
- The motivational theories of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who advocates the importance of an individual's affective involvement in learning ("... we must not merely convey bundles of information, but must provoke curiosity").<sup>6</sup>
- The social context theories of Russian psychologist Lev Vigotsky, who emphasizes learning through social interaction, mediated by someone more knowledgeable such as a parent, teacher or mentor/master craftsman.<sup>7</sup>

### Creativity, Connection, and Community

Avoda Arts uses the arts to help teens connect the disparate parts of their identity, thereby creating a more integrated individual. The all-encompassing nature of Jewish history, tradition, ritual and culture – typically offered through text-based learning – provides a rich bank of resources from which to derive creative

inspiration and personal meaning. An arts-based Jewish curriculum allows teens to tap into their expressive impulses, create new artistic traditions, and tell their own stories. The goal is to provide a valued venue to teens, in which their artistic and Jewish lives can be fused in practice.

Two core programs capture the essence of the Avoda Arts philosophy:

- Creating Commentary is a semester-long “Artist Beit Midrash” program that explores the intersections of art, creativity, and the “big ideas” in Judaism. Through interactive discussion and hands-on art making, students interpret, critique, challenge, and make new meaning from traditional Jewish texts. Currently taught as a two-credit course at NYU and SUNY-Purchase College, the course is now being adapted for use in high school settings.
- Objects of the Spirit is a traveling exhibition of ceremonial art by the noted painter and sculptor Tobi Kahn. The multi-faceted educational program includes experiential arts workshops for middle and high school students, where participants are able to reflect on the role of ritual in their lives. Having traveled to 12 U.S. cities since 2000, the exhibition program will visit Washington, DC, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Miami, and Memphis over the next two years.

Avoda Arts also works with other organizations to bring arts-based programming into both formal and informal learning settings. Our program partners share an approach to Jewish education that promotes active, authentic, community-driven learning. For example, we are working with award-winning photographer Zion Ozeri on The Jewish Lens, a comprehensive middle-school curriculum that explores Jewish values, Jewish communities, and the art of photography. We are also working with the Berkshire Institute for Music and Arts (BIMA), a four-week, residential summer program for 9th-11th graders. Set at Williams College, in Williamstown, MA, the BIMA program allows Jewish students to hone their artistic skills in a chosen medium, integrate Judaism into their artistic interests, and explore the ways that the arts and Judaism can build a stronger Jewish identity.

### Some Planning Guidelines

In my years of work as a curriculum designer, I have found the following elements essential to building successful arts-based learning experiences for teen audiences:

- Remember that adolescents are at different points in their personal development. Provide multiple contexts and levels for students to engage in the art making.
- Provide mentoring experiences. Visits by accomplished, professional artists are deeply meaningful to teens. Think creatively for ways to share the costs of visiting artists with other Jewish communal organizations.
- Create a safe space for honest, creative expression – a place where teens can tell their stories in their own words without fear of being judged.
- Promote peer collaboration, especially across artistic disciplines. For example, encourage the filmmaker to team up with the musician and have the painter collaborate with the dancer to explore various styles of creative Jewish expression.
- Allow students ample time for reflection. Ask challenging and layered questions that promote a culture of thinking.

- Recognize the importance of the process in art making. The product (what gets created) is important, but the process also offers its own unique artistic experience.
- Model the behavior that Jewish artists are vital and legitimate educational resources for reaching young adults.

### Concluding Thoughts

Using the arts to teach Jewish subject matter enables teenagers to engage with ideas in a personal and compelling way. The arts strengthen self-expression in teens and help instill a message that their thoughts, feelings, and actions matter. If we are truly invested in giving our teenagers a lifelong love of Jewish learning and practice, we must provide creative, substantive Jewish experiences that encourage students to stretch their imaginations, explore personally relevant ideas, and discover powerful, new connections in their own Jewish lives.

I am keenly aware that there are critical questions about how an arts methodology fits into our Jewish educational system. Challenges abound, including how to train teachers, how to tailor programs for formal and informal settings, and how to engage communal leadership to support such a new toolkit for teachers. That is why Avoda Arts continues to work with academic and community leaders to facilitate the integration of arts-based learning across the Jewish educational landscape.

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*Debbie Krivoy is the Managing Director of Avoda Arts, a cultural and educational organization providing teenagers and young adults with a creative understanding of Judaism. She received her M.Ed. in Instructional Design from the University of Massachusetts, and has worked as a curriculum designer in a variety of educational settings. For more information about arts-based Jewish learning, visit [www.AvodaArts.org](http://www.AvodaArts.org).*

### Endnotes:

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2. These include Rutter, Michael and Marjorie Rutter. *Developing Minds: Challenge and Continuity Across the Lifespan*. New York: Basic Books, 1993; Lefstein, Leah and William Kerewsky. *Young Adolescents and Their Communities: A Shared Responsibility*. Center for Early Adolescence, 1982; Horowitz, Bethamie. *Connections and Journeys: Assessing Critical Opportunities for Enhancing Jewish Identity*. UJA-Federation of New York, 2000.
3. Malmquist, Carl P. *Handbook of Adolescence*. New York: Jason Aronson, 1978.
4. Scheer, Marc R. "Life Would Be Boring Without It": *What Do Kids Really Think About the Arts?* Harris Interactive for the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, 2003.
5. Gardner, Howard. *Frames of Mind*. New York: Basic Books, 1983.
6. Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper & Row, 1990.
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