

## **Teenage Boys and Girls: A Jewish World Apart**

Leonard Saxe and Shaul Kelner

Today's American Jewish teenagers are the first to grow up in an era when gender equality is both the law of the land and a principle of non-Orthodox Judaism. Just as our society has removed barriers to women taking leadership positions, so too have non-Orthodox Jewish movements removed barriers to women becoming rabbis and communal leaders. In the world of Federations and Jewish philanthropies, gender neutrality is accepted at least in principle if not always in practice. The increasing prominence of women in visible public roles, however, has masked another important shift in the gendered experience of American Jewish life, one that is playing itself out among Jewish adolescents: teenage Jewish boys are rapidly exiting the playing field, leaving the girls to hold the ball.

Although young people in North America are perhaps the most studied and tested group of individuals who have ever lived, there is a surprising lack of systematic data about Jewish teenagers. We tried to redress the lack of information by surveying nearly 1,500 Jewish adolescents and their parents, asking about their lives, activities and attitudes about school, religion and family. Our goal was to understand how teens make sense of their Jewish and secular worlds and to examine how this changes over the course of adolescence. One of the most striking findings was that boys and girls often see their world in quite different ways. Consistently, we found that girls were more likely than boys to be active members of their Jewish communities, to espouse Jewish values, and to enjoy participation in the community; boys more readily bid farewell to Jewish involvement.

### **Affective versus Instrumental Orientations**

Although both boys and girls were highly motivated to be successful, girls were more oriented to social activities and boys toward individual activities. These different orientations have been called affective versus instrumental orientation and reflect traditional views of women as nurturers and men as producers. Girls, in contrast to boys, place greater value on things such as family, finding meaning in life, working to correct social injustice, and, being Jewish. Girls were also more likely to be involved in volunteer work. They were also more favorably disposed to school, less often bored and less likely to blow off either their assignments or entire days of school.

### **Involvement in Judaism/Jewish Community**

Boys expressed consistently less interest in things Jewish, held more negative opinions about past Jewish experiences, and generally considered Judaism more peripheral to their lives in comparison to the girls. Boys were twice as likely to

say that they saw their *bar mitzvah* as their graduation from their Jewish schooling. Judging by their participation in post-*bar/bat mitzvah* Jewish education, youth groups, and Israel experience programs, it does not appear that they are merely more negative in expressing their views. Indeed, they participate less and – even when they do participate – they enjoy it less and find it less meaningful.

Overall, we found that by the end of high school, nearly half of those who had become bar or bat mitzvah had little involvement in the Jewish community. They neither participated in formal Jewish education, nor informal programs such as youth groups, Jewish camps, or Israel trips. Although this trend applies to both boys and girls, it is more pronounced among boys and is accompanied by more negative attitudes. This should be a cause for concern.

### **Supporting Teenagers in the Jewish Community**

The disproportionate withdrawal of teenage boys stems from a basic mismatch between their instrumental orientations and the Jewish community's affective presentation of self. Not everyone is looking for a Jewish identity-building experience, nor should one have to, in order to find an open door to Jewish life. Instead of demanding that teens first conform to a normative vision of Jewish involvement as an end in itself, the Jewish community can engage them by identifying and serving their needs.

The teenagers we studied, both boys and girls, live stressful lives; school, work, and social pressures are not trivial. Jewish organizations can help young people cope with the pressures of adolescence -- providing physical outlets like sports and intellectual support like preparation for SATs. Work contributes to these pressures, as many teens are forced to choose between the jobs they love and the jobs that pay. The Jewish community can offer a better alternative: well-paying, meaningful employment within the Jewish community. Some of these programs, like competitive sports, may attract more boys than girls, and fill gaps in engagement that currently leave boys on the outside.

The disaffection of boys from Jewish life opens a window into a central fact of American Judaism: Except for a minority who make it their full-time profession, Jewish life in North America is primarily a voluntary activity, and meets affective rather than instrumental goals. In a society that defines itself by work, and judges success by material gains, Judaism is treated as something to be done in one's spare time, if at all. Boys are more likely than girls to take this as a cue to exit, but the problem transcends gender. It calls out for a response.

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Being a Jewish Teenager in America: Trying to Make It, published in 2000 by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies. This essay is adapted from the research findings. Len Saxe, Director of the Center, is a professor of social policy. Shaul Kelner is a Research Associate and Wexner Graduate Fellow pursuing a Ph.D. in sociology at the City University of New York. Reprinted with permission from Sh'ma ([www.shma.com](http://www.shma.com)) May 2001.