

THE RESTRUCTURING OF YOUTH PROGRAMMING FOR THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMUNITY

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Today's teens and their families are less Jewishly educated, less Jewishly affiliated, and less Jewishly involved than past generations. Only a Community Youth Department created from a partnership of the existing agencies and institutions serving Jewish youth will have the capability of attracting families and maintaining them in the Jewish community.

The release of the Council of Jewish Federations' 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) has sent shock waves through the Jewish community. With fewer than half of American Jews saying that being Jewish is important in their lives, the CJF study poignantly unveils the remarkable paradox in American Jewish life—in the success of integrating into society at large, we are at risk of losing that which has identified us as Jews.

If the CJF study has told us anything, it is that there is no system of accountability for the continuity of Jewish life in America. What needs to be developed is an organized, coordinated community effort to identify and track every Jewish teen and to create an environment where that teen and his or her family will find stimulating opportunities to explore, discover, or rediscover their Judaism in user-friendly and inviting institutions.

In his article entitled "Operation Joseph—The Rescue of American Jewish Youth," Boeko (1993) advocates a revolutionary overhaul to the way youth are being served in America. He calls for an emergency funding campaign from federations to finance the creation of Community Youth Departments that could link teens to the federation, synagogue, JCC, and overall community. Shrage (1993) has also outlined the idea of providing every Jewish teen an educational trip to Israel, an intensive camping/retreat program, a youth group experience, and a synagogue affiliation. Both their ideas have been stated in

the theoretical; this article focuses on the operational level—the restructuring of these programs that currently serve American Jewish youth—and provides examples of how elements of this model are being put into place in the MetroWest community.

THE PRESENT

According to the NJPS, there are about 235,000 Jewish teenagers in the "core Jewish population" between the ages of 15-19, as compared with 425,000 in 1970 (Kosmin et al., 1991). By "core Jewish population" the NJPS describes an "aggregate which reports no non-Judaic loyalty" that includes three groups—those who were born Jewish and adhere to Judaism as their religion, those who are Jewish by choice, and those who are born Jewish and do not claim to have a religion.

The demographic profile of the younger individuals in the core Jewish population is significant for two reasons. When the pyramid of the core Jewish population is drawn according to age, it is weakest at its base where the youngest members of the Jewish community are situated. Furthermore, when the Jews by religion and the Jews with no religion are compared within the core Jewish population, it becomes clear that the younger age groups contain a larger proportion of Jews with no religion, with Jews by religion being a relatively old age structure (Kosmin et al., 1991).

The NJPS suggests that there will be a net loss to the core Jewish population in the next generation because of the large number

of children being raised in intermarried families. The position that these teens and their cohorts in the core population develop toward intermarriage will be of major importance to the future of Jewish life.

Only 400,000 or 48% of the core Jewish population under 18 receive any type of Jewish education (Kosmin et al., 1991). One-third of these children are in day schools (JESNA, 1992). Although overall there has been a slight increase of 8% in those enrolled in Jewish education since 1978, probably due to a correlative rise in the absolute number of children in the Jewish population, there has still been a decline of 32% since 1960 (Waxman, 1983).

A small, dramatic study of the children of Jewish philanthropists attests to a shift in attitude toward giving to Jewish charities. Although children of philanthropists continue to give the same sums of money to charity as their parents, they have channeled their funds into more global arenas (Mayer, 1988). Some of the reasons that these children of philanthropists were reluctant to support the Jewish charities of their parents included their lack of Jewish education and their uncertainty as to the exact role and function of UJA-Federation.

Fostering the right conditions to begin reconnecting Jewish youth with their Judaism must begin with a partnership among the existing agencies and organizations serving youth. The statistics quoted above paint a frightening picture for the future of American Jewish life. Today, Jewish teens and families are less Jewishly educated, less Jewishly affiliated, and less Jewishly involved, and they do not have the same restrictions and barriers, both internal and external, in American society that their forefathers and foremothers faced. American Jewish families have become disenfranchised with Judaism because Jewish organizational life has deconstructed Judaism and forced its members to strike isolationist poses. American Jewish communal organizations must now realize that the battle for American Jewish families needs to be

fought on a united front if we are to attract families and maintain them as Jewish.

THE NEW STRUCTURE

Today, there is little or no cooperation in teen programming among the JCC, Hebrew or day schools, synagogues, and synagogue youth groups; more often, there is a spirit of competition. In the division of teens along congregational, ideological, and organizational lines, the image of a global Jewish community has been lost. The establishment of a Community Youth Department is critical to the restructuring of youth programming. As Boeko (1993) writes,

Each community will create a department of youth, under the supervision of one of the quality agencies of the community. If there is no such agency, supervision and coordination can be centralized within federation....These community youth departments will make their professional resources available to all the youth programs of the community...for upgrading of programs, leader training, and community-wide events. Membership requirements should be minimized, fees affordable, and when necessary, scholarships available to youth from low income families.

Although I concur with Boeko on the need for Community Youth Departments, I disagree about the nature of the partnership. Boeko's supposition is that youth groups will be inclined to use the services of the Community Youth Departments because they will be able to benefit from those resources. Unfortunately, Jewish youth do not tend to associate with Jewish youth groups because youth group workers do not possess the skill or training to adequately provide a meaningful Jewish experience. Rectifying this problem is a prerequisite to the restructuring of community youth groups.

The many institutions now serving youth should work in a partnership under the auspices of Community Youth Departments as described below:

The federation: The federation is the

linchpin in the restructuring of community youth programs. It will spearhead the initial contact and ultimate partnership among the various organizations and agencies. The federation will be charged with the collection and distribution of resources, both fiscal and professional, to create a hierarchy of programs and services available to Jewish youth and their families. Intrinsic to this framework will be the introduction of teens to federation and the commitment on the part of the entities involved to educate teens and their families about the need to connect to federation.

The Jewish Community Center: The JCC will serve as the source of expertise in youth programming for the community and as the address of the Community Youth Department. Its staff will either supervise directly or assist the synagogues and nondenominational groups in the supervision of youth groups. They will train youth group leaders and provide community leadership opportunities and other joint ventures on a large scale for all the Jewish teens of the community. Its staff will work to coordinate educational programs for teens and their families, and hook day school and yeshivah teens into Jewish youth group experiences. The JCC will serve as a clearinghouse for Jewish camp and Israel programs. The main focus will be connecting teens to synagogue and community while working with all the other organizations and agencies to connect families to Judaism. This could mean recommending a synagogue or nondenominational youth group based on the request of a teen and family.

Synagogues/synagogue youth groups: In this article, synagogue youth groups have been deliberately listed as a different entity from the synagogue because the reality is that the two sometimes operate independently. This is not ideal. The rabbi and youth group leader should work in concert to create a worthwhile synagogue and youth group experience for the family and the teen. Where the synagogue and its youth group operate in a unified fashion, then their role will be to identify congregational

families with a teen and to affiliate these teens with the services of the synagogue and the Community Youth Department. Having the capability of producing a youth program well beyond the scope and capabilities of the single synagogue or the single youth movement, the synagogue can now market a much more intensive and exciting youth group experience.

Synagogues would also strengthen their youth commissions through the services of the Community Youth Department. Members of the youth commissions would gain the skills necessary to oversee a youth program, and would require that their youth group workers contractually partake in ongoing inservice training.

Non-denominational Jewish youth groups: These youth groups, as well as the synagogue youth groups, would benefit in that their programs would now extend to include a much broader array of services as part of the association with the Community Youth Department.

Hebrew schools: Hebrew schools, connected with synagogues, often act independently of the synagogue and synagogue youth group. An element of the restructuring of all community youth programs will be the internal scrutiny that each synagogue will engage in to better its own programs and services and ensure greater cooperation between its Hebrew school and youth groups. Hebrew schools should assist in the synthesis of classroom materials with youth programs and services. Hebrew school teachers could relate the content of their classroom presentations to their participants' experiences as part of the Community Youth Department.

Day schools/yeshivot: Day schools and yeshivot tend to create all-encompassing environments for their student bodies so that the student's extracurricular involvement may not extend beyond the school. If the teens are involved in a movement, it will generally be one approved by the school. Although it is a tribute to these students and their families that they have chosen to receive a comprehensive Jewish education, it

is a disservice to separate these students from the community. Involvement in the Community Youth Department can enrich the lives of these students by providing a broad overview of *Klal Yisrael*. We must remember that Hillel and Shammai will be inextricably linked for time immemorial precisely because of their differences.

Parents: In confronting the issue of teenage disillusionment toward Judaism today, parents need to be included in the equation of service. A stereotype has emerged that teens do not want to be involved in activities with their parents. This is untrue—teens would be willing to have meaningful interactions with their parents in the right situations, under the right conditions, doing the right activities, and most importantly, having the right facilitators.

The lack of communication and duplication of services within a community are the clearest indications of the need for a Community Youth Department. Individually some synagogues, youth group movements, JCCs, Hebrew schools, or day schools/yeshivot may put out a simple, unsophisticated newsletter; in tandem, a community teen newspaper is born. A Hebrew school may lack the number of enrollees to benefit from group rates at a local theater production; as part of the Community Youth Department, Jewish teens can have their own command performances. Individually, parents remain a neglected quantity in most communities where youth are served; as part of the Community Youth Department, parents are connected to Jewish issues concerning themselves and their teen.

In some small communities, the recognition of limited resources and expanded programmatic offerings has steered synagogues, JCCs, and federations in the direction of partnership. A partnership between the JCC, the synagogues, the Jewish Family and Children's Services, and the Jewish day school has been established in Marin County, California. This project, going under the name of Marin Jewish Youth Contact (MAGYC), has been able to maintain the integrity of the individual youth groups

while linking teens from various youth programs through its activities. The partnership has produced an assortment of activities that greatly augments the availability of programs for teens.

Another proposal suggested by the Metrowest JCC executive director and refined by local rabbis calls for the restructuring of youth workers and is more controversial. Many synagogue youth workers lack experience working with youth, as well as meaningful opportunities to receive training and supervision. One solution is to create a cadre of professional youth workers who would be hired, trained, and supervised by the JCC under the auspices of the Community Youth Department. These professional youth workers could work for two or three synagogues, preferably within the same movement. During the summer, this cadre of professional youth workers could be fielded out to the JCC camp system, the community's Israel trip, or their movement's camp or Israel program. This position would therefore be a year-round job with a salary that would be respectable enough to hire skilled individuals with a gift for working with youth.

Although this would be an ambitious undertaking, the positives of this suggestion are that it addresses directly the issue of undertrained, unsupervised youth workers. Some may argue that a nondenominational agency like the JCC should not become involved in the supervision of synagogue staff because of the politics involved and because the Community Youth Department supervisors may lack the expertise and finesse to work with such a diverse population of Jews. I believe the positives of a trained, supervised cadre of linked youth workers outweigh the risk of a JCC's involvement with a synagogue. Furthermore, the staff of the Community Youth Department would be highly trained and highly skilled individuals with extensive, broad-based Jewish backgrounds who are schooled in community organization. They would represent the pinnacles of professionalism, and would serve as role models to the youth and youth

group workers of the community.

In this restructuring, the role that parents play is of major importance. The NJPS shows us that the drift from traditionalism is a familial phenomenon. Reconnecting teens to Judaism without an effort to reconnect their parents is senseless. The Community Youth Departments must be responsible for workshops, study sessions, and further education for teens and their parents.

Two final issues face the challenge of restructuring community youth programs: who will pay for it and who will run it? Federations will be called in to provide the financial investment and initial capital that a restructuring requires. The Community Youth Department may always need the assistance of the federation, yet this funding will decrease over time as teens become more active participants and contributors to the federation as a result of their connection to the Community Youth Department. Synagogues will be asked to pay for services that the Community Youth Department will provide, and individual membership may be asked of the Jewish teens of the community. This membership can be recognized by a card that provides discounts at programs and events. With proper marketing, the card can even become a status symbol in its own right.

THE METROWEST EXPERIENCE

In my current capacity as the Synagogue Youth Outreach Coordinator of MetroWest, I have been charged by the federation to improve the quality of synagogue youth group programs and to provide community-wide leadership, social, and recreational activities for the teens of the community. I am based at the JCC, offering the support of the agency from facility usage to staff and lay leader supervision and training. I began my work assuming that I could provide programs and services that synagogues would be receptive to because they could provide their youth group workers and teens with opportunities and skills that could enhance the quality of the overall group. This has

not been the case.

I began by trying to create a series of training workshops for the youth group workers. I did outreach in two ways; I organized meetings of the regional directors of the youth groups of the community, and I contacted the youth group worker directly. Although the regional offices were all receptive to the idea of joint youth group worker, teen, and lay leader trainings, many individual youth group workers were not. They were unwilling to give up their time or ask their teens to be active in a program outside the synagogue. Many of these workers were not receptive to working with a synagogue youth commission.

Although these training sessions have been well received, they only attract a small portion of the youth workers in the community. Many youth groups operate in a fashion unconstrained from their regional offices, perhaps because regional offices do not hire the workers that serve the programs. Although individual synagogues hire their workers, I rarely come into contact with a synagogue youth group worker who receives any type of supervision. Youth group workers have little incentive for bettering themselves and their programs if they continue to remain unaccountable for their work.

In MetroWest, I have advocated that smaller synagogues of the same denomination, or of different denominations but that are in proximity to each other, which are having difficulties sustaining their own youth program, create "zones" of service where they pool their fiscal resources to hire the best possible worker to serve the various synagogues through one joint program. In this scenario, the meetings rotate between the coalition of synagogues.

This "zones" of service concept has had mixed results. It has succeeded for synagogues in close proximity to each other, especially if one synagogue has been willing to assume administrative responsibility for the youth group. However, it has not worked as well when the traveling distance between the synagogues created a hardship

for the parents and participants and when the synagogues were vying for control over the youth group.

The call by the CRB Foundation to send every Jewish teen to Israel may be a key to restructuring of youth programs. The MetroWest community, like other pilot communities receiving funding from CRB, is experiencing a growing concern about how to best use our current resources to promote the Israel experience. Synagogue, federation, JCC, Hebrew school, and youth group leaders have been called upon to rethink the way the Israel experience has been presented to the teens of this community and to create new, bold, and attractive approaches. The Israel Experience Initiative, under the auspices of our Israel Program Center, has brought scores of teens together from a variety of youth groups, synagogues, and organizations to participate in pre- and post-trip sessions. It is rewarding to witness Jewish teens from different backgrounds and affiliations connect over something as vital as the Israel experience.

This type of partnership between the organizations and agencies serving youth can be the first movement toward the creation of a Community Youth Department. The excitement and energy generated by sending teens to Israel through the coalition of Jewish organizations and agencies can become the standard operating procedure for all youth activities. With federations poised to receive funds to send teens to Israel, and synagogues, JCCs, and youth group movements thrilled at the prospect of subsidizing their Israel trip, the time is ripe to create new and lasting ties.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The restructuring of youth programs for the American Jewish community is a bold undertaking, which many may say is unnecessary to shoulder. There is no doubt that improving the quality of a youth program JCC by JCC, synagogue by synagogue, youth group by youth group would be meritorious for the entire Jewish community. However,

the values and traditions of Judaism are now slipping away. A true antidote to this situation must be the realization that the current status of youth programs is unacceptable. To quote Hillel, "If not now, when?"

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