

Connecting The Unconnected; Reaching Out to High School Youth*

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Introduction

The following details the efforts at outreach of the Youth Department of the Jewish Federation—Council of Greater Los Angeles which began in July, 1979.

Why "outreach?" Why did the Youth Department find it necessary to design a program specifically aimed at unaffiliated high school youth?

Many skeptics were asking these same questions prior to the Youth Department's launching of its program whose target was the more than 40,000 unaffiliated Jewish teens in the Greater Los Angeles area. "After all," they claimed, "don't we have enough work to do with our own," with those already identified with the Jewish community?

The rationale for such an outreach program is found in part in a basic concept of Judaism:¹ A Jew has the responsibility to impart to his fellow Jews a sense of the importance of actively participating in the Jewish community.

Another part of the rationale was the recognition that unless a concentrated effort was made to stem the rapidly declining number of people involved in the Jewish community, the continued survival of American Jewry could not be assured. Seeking out those who were not yet involved rather

than waiting for them to approach us was one channel for such an effort.

A Demographic Study

In a recent study² Bruce Phillips found through random sampling startling numbers of Jewish teens in the Greater Los Angeles area who were not receiving a Jewish education.

While 41.7% of children in the age range of 6-13 years in families surveyed were receiving a Jewish education, only 18.7% of those in the 14-18 age group were receiving a Jewish education. Additionally, the "drop-out" rate of teenagers has been a high 54.5%. We can also see that 45.5% of Jewish teens in Los Angeles had never received any form of Jewish education.

For the 6-13 group, the rates for boys and girls were almost identical. In the age group 14-18, however, the overall proportion of Jewish children receiving a Jewish education dropped to less than 19%. Further, boys in this age group were more than twice as likely to be receiving a Jewish education than girls.

In households with children in the 6-18 year old range who were not currently receiving a Jewish education, the respondents were asked about previous enrollment

* Presented at the Annual Meeting of The Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Denver, May 27, 1980.

¹ Chaim Chofetz, *Sefer HaMitzvot, Hakatzer*. Israel.

² Bruce Phillips, "Planning and Demographic Data from Community Telephone Survey," Jewish Federation Council of Greater Los Angeles, 1979. See also "The Service Delivery Information System, A tool for Accountability," this journal, Vol. LVII, No. 3 (1981), pp 35-39.

in Jewish school. Combining figures on current enrollment with those on previous enrollment, we found that of the males aged 6-18, 56.3% have had some exposure to Jewish education. Of the females in this age group, the figure is 54.4%. In the age range 14-18, 79.9% of the males and 46.4% of the females have received at least some Jewish education.

While final data are not yet available regarding informal education (e.g., Jewish youth groups), existing figures show that of the approximately 50,000 Jewish teenagers in the Greater Los Angeles area, less than 5,000 are currently registered in such programs.

We found that many teens were dissatisfied with what they received in both formal and informal Jewish educational experiences. Others had never had exposure to any type of Jewish education. Their lives were devoid of a Jewish experience. Parents thought it unimportant or even "unhealthy" to provide these children with a background that would allow them to make an educated choice of whether or not to identify as Jews. This inability of the teen to choose, we have often found to be one of the causes of Jews in later adolescence turning to other religions for spiritual identification.

In addition to the alienation of many teens from the adult world, as well as their lack of a positive Jewish educational experience, peer pressure plays a major role in their willingness to affiliate with Jewish activities. Many Jewish adolescents on high school campuses are quoted as being embarrassed to be identified as Jews. Instead of turning to their peers for support in this area, they deny that need and seek collective support and security in other life roles in school, with parents and peers, the most significant people in their present life.

Strategy

It was clear to us that we had to deal directly with this tremendous "drop-out"

rate by Jewish teenagers. We considered the reasons for their decision to drop out as being, 1) interest in new areas, e.g., sexuality, vocation, higher education; 2) dissatisfaction with their Jewish education; 3) rebellion against parental roles.

A program had to be constructed not only to "reach out," but to do so in a manner which was sensitive to the needs of our adolescent population. While it was essential that the program provide a sufficient amount of time to create a meaningful positive Jewish experience for unaffiliated youth, it also had to allow them adequate time to maintain pursuits of other interests. This balanced approach afforded the target population the respect they deserved as decision-making people, a crucial determinant for the ultimate success of the program.

The Youth Professional Advisory Committee (Y-PAC), a committee of full time professionals representing all major Jewish youth organizations in Los Angeles, was approached with a proposal to reach out to Jewish teenagers at those high schools having significant Jewish populations. The coordinators, the director of the Youth department of Jewish Federation Council and the author, interviewed prospective staff with an eye to their serving, as positive role models, to their establishing a personal rapport with interested teens, and to make themselves available when needed. The coordinator offered direction, orientation, training and supervision to the staff, as well as handling all administrative aspects of the program. This included the establishment of communication with the school systems, the initial formation of club charters and the securing of guest resources. Staff members received an honorarium based on their professional status. They were paid only if they or their supervisors were not able to justify this work as part of their usual job description. Additionally, it was understood that the Jewish Student Club program was to make every effort to

encourage teens' involvement in existing Jewish youth programs. In effect, the Youth Department served as a neutral agent on behalf of all Youth Professional Advisory Committee member organizations. This, of course, took time and constant support and involvement of Y-PAC member groups with the program.

Implementation

The intention was for staff to go to where the students are. Los Angeles is different from many other major cities in that teenage "hang-outs" are either non-existent or geographically scattered and situated far from schools. This is related to the minimal "street traffic" in Los Angeles lifestyle. Parks, street corners, candy stores and other traditional "outreach target areas" could not be counted on as potential sites for high school outreach in Los Angeles. Most teenagers leave in automobiles. Thus it is difficult to approach them outside of school.

We approached individual teens to see if they were willing to help establish a Jewish Student Club on their high school campus. Our goal was to aid them in setting up a low keyed, low pressure situation where a Jewish teen could come to meet other Jews at his/her school and share ideas on topics of common interest. This program had to be easily accessible (both with respect to location and schedule) to accommodate the adolescents' temporary unwillingness to make a commitment to the program and their need to maintain other interests. All students agreed that a weekly club scheduled at lunch time would stand the best chance of survival. Additionally, the consensus of students was that students did not need our assistance in setting up any social outlet. There were many other social diversions already available to them. What they requested were programs which would be of educational interest, they having a desire to receive information presented in a non-threatening manner, placing them in the

role of not merely listener, but also contributor.

At an early point, students approached their schools to charter a "Jewish Student Club" as a part of campus activities. The Youth Department agreed to contact teachers who might serve as club sponsors and to find proper resources to lead discussions, show films or provide interesting guests. It was made quite clear, however, that this would be a program for students, run by the students, autonomous and free of any Youth Department control, i.e., the Jewish Student Club was a part of the "school program" rather than an identified program of the Youth Department. The staff members of Y.D. served as club facilitators, helping to contact new students, securing the necessary resources and assisting in the maintenance of a relationship between club and school. This included adherence to the law that "No sectarian or denominational doctrine shall be taught in any school nor may a faculty member legally engage in Bible instruction to students on school grounds during his lunch period."

In accordance with this law the following were among those chosen, by the students, as potential topics of discussion at club meetings: Soviet Jewry, The Los Angeles Jewish Community, Israel, The Holocaust, Neo-Nazism, Cults and Missionary Movements, Judaism and Sexuality, The Jewish View of Substance Abuse, The Jewish Life Cycle. Guests included Jewish communal professionals, rabbis, youth leaders, school staff, government leaders, art therapists, musicians and other individuals interested in particular discussion areas.

All clubs agreed to meet at the same time, weekly, and in the same room. Clubs did not charge dues and participants did not "expect" to be there weekly. Rather, they attended because of a specific chosen interest. Publicity was the responsibility of the students with topics announced in school bulletins and on the school public

address system. The students realized that in order for the club to be successful they had to get the word out to friends. They were the only ones who could be trusted. They had to say that the Jewish Student Club was an "okay" place to be.

In addition to the institution of the Jewish Student Club on high school campuses, another program was set up, the Mobile Resource Unit, to supplement club activities and to reach out to additional students who might not be aware of the clubs, or be willing to "take the risk" of "checking out" a Jewish campus club. All target school districts were offered a series of educational units about Jewish culture in today's society. Instruction was offered about all religions and races to promote a better understanding of self as of others with whom they co-exist.

The "educational units" consisted of exhibits which were rotated monthly. They provided pictorial displays, multi-media techniques, live performances and discussion. They presented the Jew as an integral part of the multi-ethnic world in which he lives. Publications, slides, "lectures," tapes, movies, playlets, song and dance, appearances of "live subjects" were the varied media in six exhibits that were rotated each month at each school: Jewish book month, Soviet Jewry, the Holocaust, Israel Today, a History of Israel, a Guide to Jewish Los Angeles.

The Mobile Resource Unit utilized a mobile home as its base of operations where it also had displays.

A third program, the Chai-Line, a "helpline" for Jewish teenagers, was put into operation. Its goal was to serve as an information and referral source to the entire Jewish teenage population (specifically geared towards the unaffiliated). The program is serviced by trained volunteers specifically chosen for their qualities as sensitive, caring human beings. They studied for eight weeks to develop listening skills, an understanding of the adolescent

and specific content areas related to the Jewish teen. Every day two volunteers man the telephones with a supervisor on call. The training and supervision of volunteers have been coordinated by Youth Department staff and the Jewish Family Service of Los Angeles. This cooperative effort of the two agencies deals with basic teenage role issues and areas of confusion such as sexuality, drugs, parent-child relationships, school, and peer relationships. It is unique in its own right as it is the only "helpline" in Los Angeles which can claim readiness to deal effectively with specifically Jewish concerns such as anti-Semitism, cults and missionary movements and the like.

Evaluation

In general, our evaluation of both the Jewish Student Club and Mobile Resource Unit outreach projects has been positive. We have found that indeed, given the proper setting and atmosphere, Jewish teens are willing and interested in affiliating. It seems to us that the necessary elements for success include positive programs of interest to the students, publicity through student encouragement and the ability of the facilitator to relate to the participants.

It is on this basis that we were able to assist in the formation of nine student clubs during the 1979-1980 school year. We had crossed paths with over 200 students in those schools, more than 80% of whom were previously unaffiliated with any Jewish youth movement, Center program or educational institution, nor did they attend Synagogue.

Certain topics such as the threat of neo-nazism in Southern California or the dangers of cults and missionary movements, the meaning of Judaism and the psychology of sexuality and the Jewish view of substance abuse were found to be the most attractive to the Jewish student population at large.

Those staff members who had the time also to maintain contact with students outside the set club time, were more successful in maintaining a higher attendance at group discussions.

Plans for further development are to lean toward subject matter about which student consensus is greatest and to have three-session seminars on them. It would enable the program to offer a more stimulating and complete educational experience as there are often times when the presenter and students feel cheated by the time limitation.

In order to increase the visibility of existing Jewish youth programs and thus heighten the possibility of further affiliation, the Jewish Student club will sponsor city-wide out-of-school programs. Selected youth representatives will be invited to participate in these activities. Their members and staff will have an opportunity to interact with Jewish Student Club participants and offer information about their own programs.

The Mobile Resource Unit implemented at eight Los Angeles area schools was also viewed as a success. The response by both students and staff was positive. Even non-Jewish students were fascinated in receiving knowledge about the Jewish people. A recommendation was made that this program be expanded to include a broader area of subjects and more schools. Consideration was given to forming a cooperative effort with the Bureau of

Jewish Education. The program would thus increase its value to the schools as an educational tool while still maintaining its outreach component.

Summary

We have learned that there is a large number of Jewish teens in the Greater Los Angeles area who are willing to identify with Jewish activities and that outreach is an effective way to increase the probability of this affiliation. This is not to say that all Jewish teens are "reachable." We have found many adolescents who are all too content with some contrary parental values in our present day society, i.e., materialism and "How I can make it." This desire plus the pressure of the bleak economic situation in America help explain the after-school and weekend work in which teenagers are engaged. These teens are only scratching the surface of life, with little time to search for its spiritual values. For them it may be possible that only a major change in society will change their lifestyles. For the others who are in the majority, though, there is a chance that they will recognize the power that a teenager has in today's society and continue to represent the latent idealistic strivings of the adolescent culture. This capacity of young people to respond cognitively and emotionally, imaginatively, and practically, to issues of Judaism, its values and way of life, may be the key to Jewish survival.

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