Jewish Adolescents: American Teenagers Trying To 'Make It'

Leonard Saxe, Shaul Kelner, Charles Kadushin, and Archie Brodsky

Jewish adolescents in the United States live in a golden era. Amidst unprecedented wealth and security, they are mostly untouched by anti-Semitism and the barriers to success faced by earlier generations. Not surprisingly, many Jewish youth appear more firmly rooted in American than in Jewish culture and only loosely engaged in the Jewish community. Nevertheless, a renaissance in Jewish education and commitment is underway and youth are a prime focus. Day schools are flourishing, Jewish camps have waiting lists, and nearly 15,000 college students recently applied for slots in Birthright Israel, a 10-day educational experience.

Which is it? Has the dominant culture subsumed the Jewish identities of American teenagers or are they part of a vibrant Jewish community? We have been trying to answer the question by talking to teenagers and their parents. Our particular interest is in those who become *b'nei mitzvah* – that is, in understanding what happens to adolescents after they step off the *bimah*. If we can figure out what leads to high or low levels of involvement in the community, perhaps we can become more responsive to teenagers. There is a lot of speculation about what we might do and a lot of dedicated educators trying to develop innovative responses, but there is a paucity of systematic information.

To close the gap between what is known about Jewish teenagers and what we need to know, we interviewed nearly 1,300 post–*bar/bat mitzvah* teenagers, aged 13 to 18, along with their parents. The goal was to understand where teenagers are "coming from" and to try to determine what openings exist for increased involvement in the Jewish community. To understand teenagers' lives within the community contexts that shape Jewishness, we sought teenagers in communities that had high, moderate or low Jewish population density[1]. The study gives us a fascinating, if troubling, glimpse into the life experience, the attitudes and behavior, of *b'nei mitzvah* – what choices they make about living Jewishly and why. Indeed, what makes some of our findings troubling also makes them worth paying attention to, for they point to ways to enhance efforts to engage youth in the Jewish community.

Overall Jewish Participation: A Progressive "Letting Go"

To get an overall picture of how teenagers' Jewish involvement evolves over time, from our survey, we created an "Index of Jewish Participation." The index included activities ranging from participation in formal Jewish education and attendance at a Jewish camp to volunteer work for Jewish organizations or use of a JCC. Not surprisingly, the number of teens reporting any of these involvements declines steadily after age 13. From almost universal participation in 7th grade, it drops to 72% in 8th and 9th grades, levels off at 69% in 10th and 11th grades, and by 12th grade declines again to 56%.

For many of the adolescents we studied, becoming *b'nei mitzvah* is an end, not a beginning. Instead of marking entry to adult participation in the community, it begins a hiatus in their participation in Jewish activities and denotes the termination of Jewish education, not the entrée to lifelong exploration. Although there are some early markers of who will become engaged and who will not – disengagement, for example, is most pronounced among teens in conversionary homes – our way of educating and involving youth is also at fault.

Formal Jewish Education: Disillusionment Begins Early

Today's Jewish adolescents seem to view post–*bar/bat mitzvah* Jewish education as a continuation of Hebrew

school, and that, unfortunately, does not augur well for their engagement. More than half of the teens reported that at the age of 11 or 12 they seldom or never enjoyed Hebrew school. Moreover, they experienced Hebrew school differently from schooling generally. Two-thirds always or often felt bored, compared with one-third in regular school. One-quarter said they regularly failed to turn in their Hebrew school assignments, three times the percentage in non-Jewish or Jewish day schools.

Our teenage respondents made clear that, after Hebrew school, most were not interested in further Jewish education. Consistent with their attitudes, weekly participation in formal Jewish education declined steadily, from 60% in 7th grade to 22% in 11th grade, with somewhat more girls than boys participating. The rates for those from both Reform and Conservative congregations were above 45% in grades 8 and 9. Conservative participation dropped by about 20% in 10th grade, with a similar dip in Reform participation a year later (after confirmation).

Informal Jewish Education: Some, But Not Many, Are Retained

For teens already busy with school and career preparation, Jewish activities compete with secular extracurricular pursuits. Yet for some, including some of those who are most involved in other extracurricular activities, age-appropriate Jewish activities hold their own. Overall, the numbers are not large. Except for athletics, the teens engaged in few activities daily, none of them Jewish. Half never participated in a Jewish youth group, while one-quarter did so only sporadically. As for synagogue attendance, "once every few months" was the most common response in both 7th and 12th grades, and the average declined from earlier to later grades.

Just over one-quarter of the non-Jewish day school teens were exposed to informal summer Jewish education in the years following their *bar/bat mitzvah*. For their summer plans, three-quarters mentioned only non-Jewish activities, while 18% mentioned only Jewish activities. Mention of only Jewish summer activities was highest in 10th grade (29%), the peak year for travel to Israel, and lowest in grades 7 and 12 (11%). The time commitment required by summer Jewish educational activities – Jewish camp or travel to Israel – would make it difficult to combine these with non-Jewish activities, thus "raising the ante" on Jewish participation for those who want to keep one foot planted in mainstream American culture.

Nonetheless, involvement in Jewish summer activities persists through high school, only in different forms. That is, the attrition in Jewish camper enrollment after 9th grade appears to represent simply a normal outgrowing of the camper role. In our sample, this activity was replaced in 10th and 11th grades primarily by the Israel experience, secondarily by a transition to the counselor role at Jewish camps, the latter becoming virtually the sole remaining form of Jewish summer education available to 12th graders.

Participation in an Israel program has been seen as a central way to combat Jewish apathy and engage young people. Among the 120 (about 10%) of our teenagers who had been on an Israel trip, those with a strong desire to experience life in a Jewish country reported having their connection to Judaism enhanced much more than did those who did not share that desire. The same was true for those with a strong desire to be immersed in Judaism. It seems that the value of an Israel experience is, in part, a self-fulfilling prophecy. As Hamlet said, "the readiness is all."

The Academic Pressure Cooker

Anyone who has contact with contemporary teenagers knows that they lead incredibly hectic lives, much like their parents. Jewish activities compete not only with non-Jewish extracurricular activities, but also with curricular demands, which become more consuming as students move toward graduation. The hours our teens spent on homework rose steadily from grades 7 and 8 through grades 11 and 12. From grades 7 through 9 to 10 through 12, homework increased steadily, while TV viewing declined. These students worked harder for good reason. The more they studied, the higher their grades. They received a clear return on their educational investment, and it mattered to them: by 12th grade, more than 70% reported that they would be attending an elite university.

The Work Ethic: It Starts Young

Yet another competitor for teenagers' time is work. By 12th grade, nearly 80% of the students had paying jobs. The jobs the teens held evolved in age-appropriate ways – from lawn, dog and child care to sales and teaching. What is striking is the extent to which the teens chose relatively well-paying sales jobs that they did not enjoy over more satisfying but less remunerative athletic jobs. It suggests that the Jewish communi-

ty is competing not only against other communal and intellectual activities, but also against earning money.

Gender Matters – A Lot

To treat our teenage children in a gender-neutral manner would be to miss the way they really do experience life as girls or as boys. Differences in values appeared across the board, the largest being that more boys (49%) than girls (31%) placed high value on money. Boys also more frequently valued leisure time. For their part, girls were more likely to value creativity, family, being Jewish, finding meaning in life, and working for social justice.

Girls had more positive feelings toward their Jewish experiences (including schooling) and were more open to continuing such activities. Although still a minority, more girls than boys said that they enjoyed their Jewish schooling and did not think of their *bat mitzvah* as their graduation from Jewish school. In fact, girls participated in greater numbers in formal Jewish education in every grade except 9th. Girls were more likely than boys to say that they wanted to get more involved in Jewish life after *bar/bat mitzvah*, were more interested in Israel experience programs and more likely to have their connection to Judaism enhanced by that experience.

Their Parents' Children: Schooling, Dating, Mating and Raising Children Jewish

Parents had an enormous influence on teens' attitudes and behavior, much (though not all) of it in the intended directions. Adolescents were most likely to enjoy Hebrew school when their parents encouraged (but did not require) them to go. Those teens whose parents required or strongly encouraged them to go to Hebrew school were more likely to think it important to continue their Jewish education afterward than those who were not strongly encouraged to go. Parents also directly influenced teens' decision to continue their Jewish education. Indeed, the teens experienced more parental pressure than their parents saw themselves imposing. Still, just over half of the parents either required or strongly encouraged post-*bar/bat mitzvah* Jewish education.

Even by the 10th grade, over 60% of the teens whose parents required some post-*bar/bat mitzvah* Jewish schooling were still attending weekly. The numbers were lower, but still high, for those whose parents strongly encouraged it. At the other extreme, if parents did not make Jewish education a priority, their children tended not to either. By 11th and 12th grade, even those whose parents once required or encouraged Jewish education were mostly no longer enrolled. Parental influence goes only so far. Moreover, as with Hebrew school, the teens enjoyed subsequent Jewish education less when it was required of them.

Parental influence was also qualified by peer influence. The more Jewish one's social circle, the more likely one is to enroll in Jewish education, even when one's parents do not make it a priority. Among teens whose parents did not encourage continuing Hebrew school, 35% of those whose closest friends were all Jewish continued their Jewish education, compared with 7% of those with no close friends who were Jewish. Irrespective of parental attitude, about half of those enrolled had a close friend with them in Hebrew school.

The question of endogamy opened up a real generation gap. Among students attending Jewish day schools, almost three-quarters of those who had begun dating reported that they dated only Jews. For the rest of the sample, dating patterns varied by how many other Jews lived in their community. Although it was common for teens to date both Jews and non-Jews, exclusively dating non-Jews occurred only in regions of low or moderate Jewish population density. Attitudes are linked to social context, and the percentage of teenagers who believed it important to marry a Jew declined steadily as the Jewish population density declined (the average was 32%). Those who thought it most important, not surprisingly, were our Jewish day school respondents.

By contrast, 60% of the parents considered it highly important to marry a Jew. The children accurately perceived their parents' views, especially when the latter were at either extreme. Yet understanding their parents' values is not the same as sharing them. Among those whose parents thought marrying a Jew was not important, 79% expressed the same view. But the teens whose parents did think it important gave scattered responses. Parental influence toward endogamy is clearly limited, presumably because of other cultural pressures on young people.

Nevertheless, 62% of the teens thought it "very" or "extremely" important to raise their children Jewish – a goal to which they did not see exogamy as an impediment. Here the solidarity between generations was positive. When parents said raising children as Jews

was unimportant, their children's responses were mixed. But when parents said it was extremely important, half of the teens agreed. It seems that our children are not less committed to Jewish continuity, but they define it differently from their parents.

The Jewish communal context influences the parents' ability to transmit values to their children. Controlling for parental attitude toward intermarriage, teenagers from Reform synagogues were about twice as likely than those from Conservative synagogues to say that marrying Jewish is not important and about half as likely to say that it is very important. There were, however, no denominational differences when parents said in-marriage is not important. Differences of this magnitude were not found when looking at attitudes toward raising children Jewish, a principle on which the two movements do not differ.

The Meaning of Jewishness – More Symbolic Than Spiritual

More broadly, the teenagers' reactions to questions exploring what Judaism meant to them and how, if at all, it fit into their lives suggest an image of Jewishness as a kind of symbolic ethnicity. Significant numbers of teens said that being Jewish was very much about remembering the Holocaust, countering anti-Semitism, being ethical, making the world a better place, caring about Israel, or having a connection to other Jews. Some of these concerns reflect a commitment to *tikkun olam*, but not in the practical realm of philanthropy or volunteering for Jewish organizations.

Observing Jewish law and rich spirituality likewise were frequently mentioned as what being Jewish is not about. The percentage citing spirituality as something Jewishness is "very much about" more than doubled from grades 7 through 8 to 11 through 12 (but to less than 20%), whereas the modest percentage mentioning synagogue participation declined steeply over the same period. For this generation of young Jews, the synagogue does not appear to stand for spirituality, and their ethnic feelings are not necessarily expressed through organizational affiliations.

For a group of teens predictably reluctant to rate themselves low, relative to their peers, on various academic, social and athletic attributes, one-third rated themselves low on religiosity. Likewise, although 39% of the teens saw finding meaning in life as essential, only 7% thought it "essential" to do so through Jewishness. Many of these youth appear to believe that meaning is to be found in secular ways or through spiritual paths outside of Judaism.

Can We Reverse the Trends?

It is clear that Jewish teenagers are very much part of the dominant culture. The years following *b'nei mitzvah* are filled with challenges – social, intellectual and practical – and for many of our teens the Jewish community does not play a major role. The problems do not, however, seem intractable. What is hopeful about our data is that they identify both success and failure in attempts to engage Jewish adolescents. Four ideas are suggested by the data:

First, involving more teenagers requires engaging parents. It is apparent that Jewishness is not a high priority in the lives of many of our young people. But should it surprise anyone that our adolescents look more like their parents than their rabbis? Similarly, peers are undoubtedly important and may take on an even more important role for the older adolescents. Whatever the teenager's social network, finding entry points seems essential.

Second, the basis for teenage involvement needs to be laid prior to *bar/bat mitzvah*. Becoming a *bar/bat mitzvah* is a mixed experience – the ceremony and *simcha* may be wonderful, but it's in the context of an overall negative experience. Our respondents seem to be telling us that becoming a *bar/bat mitzvah* is something to be checked off on their resume – a hurdle to be overcome rather than a gateway to enter. Although Jewish institutions may later be able to recapture these young Jews for the community through innovative programming, the task would be easier if preparation and context for *bar/bat mitzvah* were more positive.

Third, the data suggest the importance of responding to the instrumental needs of the teenagers, particularly the boys. Adolescents respond to those tasks that provide them a direct reward. Perhaps the *bar mitzvah* ceremony is the best example – the child receives extraordinary attention, praise and even pecuniary reward. Later, whether it's a job or schoolwork, the incentives are made clear. It may be that, as adults, people have assumed that involvement in the Jewish community should be intrinsically rewarding. But, possibly, the community needs to think of how to expand rewards for acquisition of Jewish knowledge – whether by confirmation ceremonies or other symbols of recognition.

Fourth, at the moment when adolescents are expanding their horizons by seeking out new roles beyond that of student, forcing teenagers into a student role within the Jewish community may needlessly "swim against the tide." The *bar/bat mitzvah* often sends a mixed message: "Today you are a man/woman … tomorrow, clean your room and do your homework." There are many possibilities for treating adolescents more like adults. The Jewish community could, for example, capitalize on their interest in work by providing meaningful paid work and internships. Adolescents want to be treated as young adults, not older children.

The teenagers and adults who were our respondents were extremely generous in sharing their lives and how they felt about participation in the Jewish community. Characterizations of their reactions could be described as a cup half-full, or half-empty, but grading the Jewish community is beyond the point. What teenagers have told us is that, for many of them, Jewishness is not a central part of their lives. The challenge is to find a way to make Judaism a primary context for adolescent development. For Jewish educators, it means rethinking how they work with young people. Responding to the teenagers' needs should not be inconsistent with providing serious and engaging programs.

Share your views on this article by visiting our Web site: www.jesna.org/index/indx_dis.htm

1 Among the synagogues that provided contact information for their *b'nei mitzvah*, eight were Reform, seven Conservative, two Reconstructionist, and two unaffiliated. We also sampled youths attending Jewish day schools, but only to compare their responses to certain questions with those of the body of our sample. More than 80% of the teens contacted completed surveys, and nearly 90% of their parents agreed to be interviewed.

LEONARD SAXE is Director of the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies and a professor of social welfare and psychology at Brandeis University.

SHAUL KELNER is a Research Associate at the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University. He is a Wexner Graduate Fellow in sociology at the City University of New York, Graduate Center.

CHARLES KADUSHIN is a Distinguished Scholar at the Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University and Professor Emeritus of sociology at the City University of New York, Graduate Center, CUNY.

ARCHIE BRODSKY is a Research Associate at the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University, as well as at the Program in psychiatry and the law, Harvard Medical School at Massachusetts Mental Health Center.

This paper is based on a study conducted by the authors. A full report of the methodology and findings is being prepared and will be available during Summer 2000. Contact Professor LEONARD SAXE, *Center for Modern Jewish Studies, MS 14, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA 02454. E-mail: saxe@brandeis.edu.*

Support for development of the study was provided by the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies through a gift to the Institute for Informal Jewish Education (IIJE) at Brandeis University and from the endowment of the Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies. Appreciation is expressed to PROF. JOSEPH REIMER, *director of the IIJE, who gave the impetus for this study, and to members of the Institute's Advisory Committee, who provided feedback on a presentation of these data.*