

Gesher LeKeshet for Renewal and Renaissance in Synagogue Education

by Stephen Fabian

"I quit Hebrew school for awhile and drew back from my Jewish ties. The fact that I'm here surprises my family – even me. I know if *Gesher LeKeshet* had been around when I was in 9th grade, I would have never left."

Gesher LeKeshet student leader

What better way to promote the renewal and renaissance of Jewish learning, identity, and spirituality in the synagogue than via a team of engaged teens working with their younger peers.

"Engaged teens?!?" you ask? "But teens are our most difficult group to engage!"

If that is your initial response, you are, unfortunately, in good company. Across the country, congregations continue to wrestle with the problem of the "brain drain" of teens away from active participation in congregational — and often Jewish — life. The Jewish Population Study of 1990 revealed a student dropout rate from afternoon congregational schools of 40-60% immediately following *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*, a rate that increased to 90% after confirmation. This loss of connection between Jewish teens and the synagogue occurs just when these maturing youngsters have so much to offer to congregational vitality and when a fuller involvement in Jewish community and identity could help inform their decisions concerning college, careers, family, romantic relations, and other personal and interpersonal issues. What is needed for Jewish teens is a program that renews their connection with their education, beliefs, identity, and community and prompts them to explore and actively apply their Judaism and Jewishness. *Gesher LeKeshet* is such a program, and it works by using the power of positive peer influence to get Jewish teens motivated and engaged.

program designed in response to the challenges of post-*Bar/Bat Mitzvah* and post-confirmation education, when many congregational programs find themselves lacking in ways to keep their teens involved. Developed by the Princeton Center for Leadership Training (PCLT) in Princeton, New Jersey, *Gesher LeKeshet* is patterned after a very successful 20 year PCLT secular high school program. In the congregational setting, teens who are in the 11th and 12th grades — arguably the least participatory group of most synagogues — are trained to be peer leaders for groups of 8th and 9th graders; both groups of students and the congregation as a whole are winners as a result.

Working with a comprehensive set of

curriculum materials supplied by PCLT, the older students (*madrichim*) bond and are initially trained during an intensive overnight retreat. They are provided further guidance in weekly sessions by a team of adult advisors from their respective congregations. The *madrichim*, usually in pairs, then actively participate in the religious education of their younger peers (*talmidim*) by conducting activity-based *havurot* (group outreach sessions) once or twice each month. The adult educators who guide the *madrichim* receive five days of intensive training from PCLT staff as well as continuing technical assistance throughout the 18-month phasing-in period of the program. A mechanism for evaluating the pro-

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PROGRAM PROCESS AND GOALS

Gesher LeKeshet means "A Bridge to a Connection," and is a peer leadership

gram's effectiveness and other avenues for feedback are also provided.

What helps strengthen and solidify *Gesher LeKeshet's* presence in the synagogue is an organized group of congregational stakeholders — consisting of rabbi(s), Jewish educator(s), lay staff, and parents — that is required prior to its implementation. Not only do the students themselves work as teams in this program, but representatives of the entire congregational community are brought together as a team in a way that facilitates the program's success. Embedded in this very structure is a path to renewing congregational relationships between teens and other temple constituents, as well as among these constituents; and by implementing the program, the congregation rededicates itself to a continuing and enlivened Jewish education for its youth.

Gesher LeKeshet's goal is to engage adolescents by having them examine issues of personal relevance with their peers through a Jewish lens. To keep material fresh and stimulating for the teens, *Gesher LeKeshet* is organized by themed units in a two-year program. After exploring the concept of self, the first year emphasizes relationships with family, friends, community, and God, invigorating the teens' concepts of personal identity, social relations and responsibilities, and spirituality. Some of the themes emphasized in year one include trust, life's challenges, social responsibility, and finding balance in one's life. The second year program focuses on the Jewish use and value of calendar time, especially as expressed in the symbols, rituals, traditions, and storytelling associated with principal Jewish holidays/holy days. Some of the themes emphasized in year two include change, forgiveness, and gratitude. The last unit of the two-year program focuses on renewal, reinforcing this meta-theme that is implicit in the program from the first day the students enter it. By participating in the program, *madrichim* and *talmidim* renew ties and even make new connections with each other, with their families and synagogue staff, with their heritage, and with their beliefs and the Jewishly-informed perspective they bring to important issues and happenings in their

lives. Through this enriching experience, spiritual awareness can also be

revived or increased, as students discuss, ponder, and even model tenets of their faith and religious practice.

SPECIAL FEATURES

The vitality and effectiveness of *Gesher LeKeshet* stem from its dynamic activity-based approach, and from its emphasis on teen-relevant topics. *Havurah* sessions are fun and active happenings in which messages are imparted via games, creative activities, storytelling, and discussions. These sessions become increasingly productive as the school year unfolds, due to the improving leadership effectiveness of the *madrichim*, and to the bonds that are cultivated. *Madrichim* bond as a group during their initial intensive retreat and the ensuing weekly training class with their *Gesher LeKeshet* advisors, and then further bond with their *talmidim* group (usually composed of 10-12 students) during lively and interactive meetings once or twice per month. Together, the teens explore issues and express themselves on topics relevant to their lives in a supportive group of same-aged and — for the *talmidim* — slightly older Jewish peers.

This personalized attention from older peers, along with the interactive learning activities, group rituals, and meaningful discussion, helps the younger students define and renew their beliefs, roles, and attitudes toward Judaism. Concurrently, the older students develop valuable leadership skills, including how to organize group activities, tell Jewish stories, facilitate group discussions, and serve as Jewish role models. As a group, the teens strengthen their identities and participation as Jews in their families, synagogue, and even the broader community.

Parental involvement with the program is heightened by the annual Family Night event, which is organized and run by the *madrichim*. This event allows the program participants to share with and involve parents in components of the program, to develop empathy for each



GESHER LEKESHER

PRINCETON CENTER for LEADERSHIP TRAINING

other's points of views, and to stimulate interaction about issues that affect both the teens and their parents, thereby enriching bonds within the family.

In addition to enriching family ties, *Gesher LeKeshet* can be a potent force for synagogue renaissance. For example, one distinctive feature of the program is the training of congregational advisors who work directly in training the *madrichim*; these trainers help bring a day-to-day Judaism alive for their teen groups, and, by doing so, refresh their own perspectives. Another important synagogue feature is the mobilization of the principal stakeholders in support of the program, with a practical objective of developing the congregation's capacity to run the program internally. At the end of the initial two years of the *Gesher LeKeshet* cycle, the congregation has the autonomy, knowledge, and team of trained adults to maintain and grow the program for many years to come. Over the years, as additional teens go through the program and adults become familiar with it, the entire climate and culture of a synagogue can be transformed. This transformation may find application in deeper spiritual experiences and expression, as well as in enhanced congregational presence and activities such as through service projects in the broader community, helping to actualize the fundamental Jewish ethic of *tikkun olam*, repair of the world.

Many people may have heard about *Gesher LeKeshet* since its development and implementation in the early 1990s in congregations in New York and New Jersey. But although *Gesher LeKeshet* has been around for a decade, continuing support from the Nathan Cummings Foundation has allowed for a major revision of the program. With new activities, themes, and structure, the new *Gesher LeKeshet* promises to be an even more exciting option for congregations looking to renew the involvement of their teen population. The revised program also should be more accessible to smaller con-

gregations through the use of a "cluster" model. When an individual temple might not have a sufficient number of students or personnel to make enrollment practical, the cluster model will combine several such congregations in a specific region into a collaborative group, thus helping to solve resource and space deficiencies and other challenges.

PROGRAM EVALUATION AND RESPONSE

To assess the newly-designed *Gesher LeKeshet*, JESNA (Jewish Education Service of North America) has worked with PCLT to design assessment tools that evaluate the program's effectiveness, including surveys of *madrichim* and *talmidim*, interviews with students and other involved staff, and focus group sessions among the older and younger students. Preliminary evaluations from pilot sites implementing the revamped *Gesher LeKeshet* are encouraging: surveys of the *madrichim* indicate that they perceive their training and experience in the program to be providing valuable leadership skills. In addition, *talmidim* say they develop positive peer relationships among themselves and with their older student leaders. Significantly, the evaluation findings reveal that the majority of both *madrichim* and *talmidim* feel that active participation in *Gesher LeKeshet*:

- ♦ Increases their interest in Jewish values and traditions.
- ♦ Enhances their ability to articulate their views with regard to Judaism.
- ♦ Encourages them to appreciate and participate in Jewish rituals.
- ♦ Helps them to see the relevance of Jewish issues to their lives.

As one student leader put it, "I've learned the importance of sharing Jewish values ... and I've learned to relate my Jewish ethics in relationships with friends and family."

Adult stakeholders that oversee the program in their congregations have also had positive reactions. Rabbi Micah D. Greenstein, Senior Rabbi of Temple Israel in Memphis, Tennessee, attests: "Here's a program which trains older teens, influences younger teens, and strengthens every participant's Jewish identity in the process. *Gesher LeKeshet*

has energized Temple Israel's high school department like never before. It continues to train leaders who are teachers, thereby creating strong positive role models for our post-*B'nai Mitzvah* age students to emulate."

"..... I've learned to relate my Jewish ethics in relationships with friends and family."

Rabbi Greenstein's observations are echoed by Sharon Friedman, Education Director for Temple Har Shalom of Warren, New Jersey: "*Gesher LeKeshet* . . . has reinvigorated our High School program. Our 11th and 12th graders have bonded into a cohesive and supportive group, eagerly developing great leadership skills within a Jewish framework. We expect these skills will provide them with the tools to be successful adults, as well as encourage them to be our future Jewish leaders."

SUPPLEMENTING AND FURTHERING JEWISH EDUCATION

One of *Gesher LeKeshet*'s strengths is that although it can be implemented as a stand-alone teen program, it is primarily developed and intended as a supplement to each congregation's content-based Jewish educational curriculum. Utilized in this way, it can reinforce information being shared and obtained in more formal class settings, while also allowing for interaction on contemporary topics immediately relevant to its adolescent participants. As one student leader put it, "The topics are relevant to my life, because they relate Judaism through group dynamics instead of only religious teaching."

Against the demands and distractions of schoolwork, extracurricular activities, and an active social life, can this or any other program really renew and revitalize Jewish teen involvement with their traditions, heritage, and beliefs? With its combination of active participation and student-centered peer-to-peer interaction and instruction, *Gesher LeKeshet* engages teens successfully by combining

education with Jewish activities and socializing in the synagogue. Furthermore, by providing a context in which Jewish teens can explore issues and ideas of relevance to them within a Jewish framework, *Gesher LeKeshet* promotes the formation and sharing of a Jewish point of view. As one student leader expressed, "Through my experiences in preparation for lessons and being with other *madrichim*, I have learned to fit Judaism into my life in small ways."

Gesher LeKeshet is a place where teens can increase their understanding and appreciation of Jewish lessons and apply what they learn to their daily lives. Through this renewal and enrichment, they can then contribute more vitality to Jewish practices at home, in temple, and on the street. Lessons learned in this synagogue-based program can provide guidance for adolescents faced with multiple challenges, uncertainties, and the pressures of modern life. The potential for reawakened spirituality that *Gesher LeKeshet* provides can also serve teens as a fount from which to draw inspiration and strength. One older teen had this response to involvement with *Gesher LeKeshet*: "I have realized that no matter where life takes me, I want my Judaism to always be there. I have learned that that is what will keep me grounded in any situation." While all teens in the program may not have this positive and powerful a reaction, given the large numbers of disaffected teens who have discontinued their Jewish education and even stopped attending a synagogue, any successful effort to turn this trend around is worth some serious consideration and attention. Surely these simple words uttered by one of the younger teens in a *Gesher LeKeshet* program would be music to any Jewish educator's ears: "Now, I come and enjoy Sunday school more." ■

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