

FORUM

Gesher L'Keshet: A New Approach To Jewish High School Students

Rabbi Manuel Gold

The problem is well known—a steady decline in Jewish school enrollment after Bar/Bat Mitzvah. The reasons are also well documented—parents allow attendance to be optional; students have a multitude of competing interests and activities; academic demands increase in public school. But perhaps the most telling reason of all is that Judaism as presented in most Jewish high school curricula just doesn't touch the lives of today's teens. Teens are seeking a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives, and if they don't find it in Judaism, they look elsewhere.

Giving Jewish teens a sense of meaning and purpose is the essential goal of *Gesher L'Keshet*, a peer led high school program developed by the Princeton Center for Leadership Training. Beginning with a few congregational schools in New Jersey, the program is now being implemented in more than 40 congregations in the greater New York area. The key to the success of the program is that it trains older high school students in grades 11-12 to become peer leaders for students in grades 8-9. Jewish youth movements have been using peer leadership principles with great success for decades, but this is the first application of the model

to Jewish schooling. What makes this approach so effective?

From the perspective of the older students, the program allows them to make a contribution to their congregational community. Older teens are ready to begin adopting social leadership roles as part of their transition from adolescence to adulthood. However, they need structure and support in order to be successful. The synagogue adult team of teachers, rabbis and principals that trains and supervises the peer leaders provide the necessary supports for the older teens to succeed.

Another dimension for the older teens is the personal skills they develop by participating in the program. Among the skills are communications, teamwork, group facilitation and program planning. Older teens understand that learning transferable skills is both an immediate and long term benefit for them. They value opportunities for personal growth and development.

A third element is the reinforcement of their own Jewish beliefs, attitudes and commitments. In order to teach the younger students, the older teens need to review the Jewish values and ideals they will be teaching. In the course of planning activities and discussions for younger students, the older teens deepen

their understanding of Jewish tradition. The best way to learn is to teach.

Finally, for the older teens a peer community forms around their participation in this program. Students who attend different public and private schools and live in different communities get to know each other in a very intimate setting. They also get to know the adult leaders in a different, more personal, context than they might otherwise. While these bonds will most likely not last beyond high school, the experience of participating in a meaningful Jewish community is likely to encourage them to seek such experiences in the future.

The younger teens also benefit greatly from this program. For them, the older teens serve as accessible models of Jewish commitment and knowledge. It provides a reason for being Jewish, because older teens take being Jewish seriously. It is often easier to learn from older teens because they understand the issues of concern to the younger students. The older teens are able to make the connections between the Jewish content and the lives of the younger students. Therefore, the younger students are more willing to learn and, most probably, learn more.

The older teens serve as a model in another dimension as well. The younger teens are motivated to emulate their elders and continue their involvement so they can be peer leaders in the later grades as well. It is well documented that children and adolescents are always looking ahead to the next stage of their development. This program provides the younger teens with both a meaningful Jewish experience in the present and an opportunity for the near future.

A third element of this program for the younger teens, particularly those with older siblings as peer leaders, is to experience older teens in a new way. Often the relationships between younger and older teens is competitive and condescending. This program creates a different dynamic, requiring older teens to be supportive and understanding. For the younger teens, this is a new dimension in relations with older siblings or friends of older siblings.

Although the program is only two hours per week, the new relationships can carry over into family life and other areas of teen interaction.

The *Gesher L'Keshet* program was developed by the staff of the Princeton Center for Leadership Training about six years ago, based on a model developed for public schools. Staff of the Princeton Center, or people trained by them, conduct an initial training session for the adult leaders in organizing the program and how to train the peer leaders. Typically, the congregation's adult staff, including the teachers of both the younger and older teens, and peer leaders begin the year with a weekend retreat or shul-in for orientation and training for the peer leaders. Peer leaders are selected by the adult leaders based on defined criteria. Expectations for peer leader conduct and participation are fully articulated and peer leaders sign a 'contract', the *Brit Kavod*. Following the orientation and training, peer leaders select a partner with whom they will co-lead sessions during the school year.

Each year, the program contains fifteen two hour sessions of which the first hour is spent in separate classes. The younger students learn the prescribed content with their regular teacher, while the older students review the content and plan an activity for the younger students. In the second hour, the older students work with the younger students in small groups on the activity they have planned. Since the adoption of the program four years ago by the Board of Jewish Education, three curricular units have been developed: How Do I Decide; Great Jewish Thinkers and Body, Mind and Neshama.

Another feature of the program is a *tikkun olam*, social action, project designed and implemented by both the peer leaders and the younger students. The peer leaders do most of the planning, but the implementation involves the younger students as well. A Family Night is also part of the program in which parents of both peer leaders and younger students participate. In part, Family Night introduces parents to the program, but more significantly, it reinforces generational continuity and belonging to a larger community.

One of the personal growth dimensions of the program for peer leaders is keeping a journal in which both experiences are recorded and personal observations and reflections can be made. Peer leaders are invited to share comments from their journals, but the journals themselves are never shared. This element of critical reflection is both a learning component for the peer leaders and an evaluation tool for the program coordinators.

The potential of the *Gesher L'Keshet* program to revitalize Jewish high school education is clear, but the impact of the program can go much further. The model is adaptable to any setting that serves teens. The skill training and small group techniques used in the program are generic and not tied to any particular Jewish content. Thus, the program could be adapted by JCCs, youth groups and summer camps. While systematic evaluation of the program has not yet been undertaken, preliminary indications from congregations using the program over the past four years are very positive. Enrollment and retention of students in the high school grades appears to be increasing. Anecdotal reports from students in the program are extremely positive. While the program does include significant Jewish content, clearly its goals and objectives are more directed at the affective domain. Over the next several years, as peer leaders from the program attend colleges and universities, a clearer picture of the long term impact of the program will emerge. Will this program help create the next generation of Jewish communal leaders? As the program enters more synagogues and produces more graduates, this question will become the litmus test of its ultimate effectiveness. At this stage of its development, *Gesher L'Keshet* certainly holds this promise. ■

Rabbi Manuel Gold is an Education Specialist on the staff of the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York and works primarily with congregational school principals.