

# Jewish teens connect through Geshher LeKeshher

by Marilyn Silverstein  
NJN PMB Correspondent

It is early on a Sunday morning in winter, and the halls of the Jewish Center in Princeton are humming with the hubbub of dozens of teens — talking, laughing, downing doughnuts, and getting ready to participate in Geshher LeKeshher, a peer-leadership program offering “a bridge to connection.”

That connection is a Jewish one, and it is designed to bond 11th and 12th graders, known as *madrichim*, or leaders, with eighth, ninth, and 10th graders, known as *talmidim*, or students, according to Rachel Weitzenkorn, coordinator of Geshher LeKeshher and a counselor at the Jewish Family and Children’s Service of Greater Mercer County, which sponsors the initiative.

“The reason we really love this program is that it’s a way for students to get involved with Jewish activities, to mentor other kids and learn about Judaism at the same time,” Weitzenkorn says. “Basically, we wanted to help *talmidim* and *madrichim* form a bond and be comfortable sharing difficult topics together.”

Since Geshher LeKeshher began last September, she adds, the program has enlisted about 21 *madrichim* and more than 200 *talmidim* from four congregations in addition to the Jewish Center — Beth El Synagogue in East Windsor, Congregation Brothers of Israel in Trenton, Har Sinai Temple in Trenton, and the Jewish Community Center of Belle Meade.

The *madrichim* receive training for the program from members of the JFCS staff and three teachers: Riva Jaffe-Levy of the Jewish Center, Joshua Jones of the JCC of Belle Meade, and Stephen Minsky of Brothers of Israel. Shira Gold, a student at Rider University, assists.

“We take contemporary issues and work with them through a Jewish lens,” explains Linda Meisel, JFCS executive director. “It’s a wonderful collaborative project.”

At the outset, says Weitzenkorn, many of the *madrichim* were unsure whether they could make a

difference as role models for the *talmidim*.

Now, she says, “I really enjoy seeing the *madrichim*...how excited they are about the program and how much they love Geshher LeKeshher. It really makes me smile to see how much they’re getting out of it.”

Once a month at each of the synagogues, *madrichim* and *talmidim* come together in small groups to discuss challenging issues in a safe and confidential environment — issues such as anti-Semitism, peer pressure, interfaith friendships, and family relationships.

“The program is wonderful,” says Fran Amir, principal of the religious school at the Jewish Center, as the teens begin moving to separate classrooms for their small group sessions. “We’re delighted that the older kids are meeting with the younger kids and acting as role models. Our goal is that they take teen topics and look at them from a Jewish perspective and see how Judaism relates to their everyday lives.”

In the school library, seven younger teens prepare to do just that as they sit in a circle with their *madrichim* — Sharon Brett, 17, of Plainsboro and Allie Rubin, 16, of Yardley, Pa.

“Today’s session is pivotal,” Brett tells the teens. “It’s really where we break boundaries with each other.”

She then invites the group to discuss a series of questions printed on index cards: Who is your hero? What would you do if a friend made an anti-Semitic remark? What’s the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen? What’s the hardest thing you’ve ever had to do?

As the hour unfolds, the teens pass the cards around one by one, exploring the questions, sharing their answers, and listening to each other intently.

“There are really good intentions in the program,” 14-year-old Mitch Akselrad of West Windsor says after the session ends. “It’s something that needs to be continued. It relates real life to the Jewish



Riva Jaffe-Levy, standing, joins Gesher LeKeshet participants, from left, seated, Sasha Albert, Zoe Sarnak, Sarah Vanderbilt, Rachel Weizman, Allie Rubin, Sharon Brett and Dan Schwartz, and, foreground, Liron Noiman and Mitch Akselrad.

Photo by Marilyn Silverstein

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community.”

Gesher LeKeshet brings up issues that need to be addressed, notes Rachel Weizman, 15, of West Windsor.

“I think it’s really interesting,” she says. “You get to discuss all the things you never discuss in everyday life. I really like my *madrachim*. I’m really comfortable around them.”

“It’s nice,” agrees 16-year-old Sasha Albert of Princeton. “You talk about stuff you don’t normally talk about and you get to know people you wouldn’t otherwise know.”

Dan Schwartz, 15, of Plainsboro, says that Gesher LeKeshet is helping him make new friends.

“It connects our group together in a lot more ways than just seeing each other in Hebrew school,” he observes. “It’s a good program, and I like it a lot.”

Brett says she especially enjoys

leading the groups and connecting with the younger teens at the Jewish Center.

“It’s a way to keep in touch with my heritage through kids who are still in the program I was once a part of,” says Brett, explaining that she celebrated her confirmation at the Jewish Center two years ago. “It’s been a great experience,” she says. “I’ve gotten to know a bunch of kids. I feel like I’ve connected with them and helped them to connect with each other.”

Riva Jaffe-Levy, adviser for Gesher LeKeshet at the Jewish Center, peeks into the library to assure herself that the session has gone well.

“I think it’s a wonderful program,” Jaffe-Levy says. “It brings Jewish kids together and prepares young leadership in the Jewish community.”

“They love to be with each other,” she adds. “The younger *talmidim* look to the older ones. They’re all role models. It’s just another way to get Jewish kids together, which is a wonderful thing.”

For more information about Gesher LeKeshet, contact  
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