

## **Bro's and Ho's in Jewish Life Today**

David Bryfman

On the final night of their 12<sup>th</sup> grade youth group convention the boys gather in a dark room. Passing around a candle, each explains what their youth group experience has meant to them. Many weep openly and hug one another, expressing heartfelt feelings of belonging and a fear of entering a world without their fellow youth group members.

Scenes like this are familiar to those in the world of informal Jewish education.

Two hours earlier I had observed the same group; the only difference was that girls were present:

The guys start chanting and the females respond. At first the chants are innocuous but before long the frenzied males begin jumping up and down, some taking off their t-shirts, sweating, and screaming chants that include such lines as “make me a sandwich,” “suck my dick,” or even more graphic verses adapted from military movies. The adult advisors and professionals sit back and watch.

Hours after this observation, the same teens conducted a beautiful havdalah service. A week later, they participated in a charity walk to raise money for juvenile diabetes. And a few weeks after that, they conducted Shabbat services at the local synagogue.

Recent communal discussions have raised questions about “where the boys have gone.” Statistically it’s a valid question; some Jewish youth organizations are reporting a 70:30 split of females-to-males.

At its core, though, this question is about understanding teenagers today. In my many years working with this age group, I have encountered thousands of Jewish teenagers living around the world. Although somewhat alarming, the episodes I shared above are not isolated incidents. I’m no longer surprised when girls call one another “ho,” “slut,” or “whore” — in their lexicon, these are terms of endearment. Nor do explicit conversations about sexuality, half-naked images on social networking websites, or bros flashing one another, register shock waves anymore.

What, if anything, distinguishes these Jewish teenagers from their non-Jewish counterparts? While it appears that these Jewish teens have assimilated the cultural norms of various adolescent peer groups with whom they associate, what makes these episodes stand out is that they all occurred within Jewish contexts. Teenagers today are operating within apparently conflicting values systems and identities.

I offer three broad claims about gender in Jewish youth engagement:

**1:** Teenagers (and their parents) are leaving Jewish education en masse after the age of bar and bat mitzvah, and males are escaping faster and more furiously than females.

**2:** Contrary to political correctness there are differences — both biologically and socially constructed — between males and females.

**3:** Central to adolescence is the search for identity. Even though boys grunt and talk in single syllables they are thoughtful and intelligent; their behavior is not an indication that they don't care.

Drawing on these claims, I offer the following implications, and suggestions to Jewish organizations about how to attract not only more males, but Jewish teenagers in general.

### **1: Accept that Boys will be Boys**

In the move to redress centuries of patriarchy, Jewish rituals, spirituality, leadership, and education have gradually been feminized. Balance is now needed. The release of testosterone, aggression, and competition must be embraced rather than shunned. We should not condone sexism or intolerance, but we must accept that these phenomena exist and address them.

### **2: Recruit and Train more Educators**

We lack teachers, advisors, and counselors in the Jewish community who are qualified to address issues of gender and sexuality. This reflects a general inadequacy of training and professional development for youth educators in the Jewish community. It is essential to remember that despite teens' quest to be independent and autonomous, they still crave positive role models in their lives.

### **3: Listen to Teenage Voices**

Teenagers today transition between multiple identities with great ease. In order to understand our teens we must hear their voices. Organizations that cater to teens but do not include their voices, at all levels of deliberations, will be deemed irrelevant.

Rather than blaming pop culture or other teenagers, we should accept that issues of gender and sexuality permeate all of our youth work. The question about where have all the boys gone is not simply an issue of marketing or programming, but one that forces us to ask who our teenagers really are, and what they truly want and need from the Jewish community.

ADD BIO

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