Torah at the Center

UNION FOR REFORM JUDAISM
DEPARTMENT OF LIFELONG JEWISH LEARNING
VOLUME II, NO. 1 • FALL 2007 • STAV 5768

IN THIS ISSUE

GENDER AND JEWISH EDUCATION

UNION FOR REFORM JUDAISM
האיחוד ליהדות רפורמית
SERVING REFORM CONGREGATIONS IN NORTH AMERICA

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Dear Teacher of Torah,

You stand this day, all of you, before the Eternal your God—you tribal heads, you elders, and you officials, all the men of Israel, you children, you women, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to water drawer, to enter into the covenant of the Eternal your God… I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, but with those who are standing here with us this day before the Eternal our God and with those who are not with us here this day. (Deuteronomy 29:9ff)

In his valedictory address, Moses, who had claimed he was a man of few words (Exodus 4:10) addresses himself to the catholic Israel, Knesset Yisrael, carefully including people of every status, life stage and gender across time and space. We are addressed in the perpetual present and commanded to accept the conditions of the brit, the covenant between the children and the God of Israel. Even if we become lost in the minutiae, in the thicket of mitzvot, in the language of reward and punishment that permeates the Book of Deuteronomy, we should find ourselves at home in its overarching message of universality. At the inaugural public recitation of Torah, the address was poignantly inclusive. "[Ezra] read from it, facing the square before the Water Gate, from the first light until midday, to the men and the women and those who could understand; the ears of all the people were given to the scroll of the Teaching." (Nehemiah 8:3)

We are the ones who make distinctions between people of different age, gender, race and status. We are the ones who differentiate, who discriminate not only "between" but also "against" each other. God, however, is capable of transcending these all too human conventions. One way we can imitate God is by aspiring to see and appreciate that which unites us as more compelling than that which divides us. We hope to make a compelling case for this "divine" perspective as it relates to gender and Judaism.

This issue of Torah at the Center lives up to its name, and we hope you will agree that it also lives up to its promise, putting Torah at the center of an issue that is as timely as it is timeless—gender. Apparently, Torah is of at least two minds on the subject, as are we: "God created the human beings in [the divine] image, creating [them] in the image of God, creating them male and female." (Genesis 1:27) and "God Eternal took one of the ribs and closed up the flesh in that place. Now God Eternal built up the rib taken from the man into a woman and brought her to the man." (Genesis 2: 21b-22)

These two verses seem more in opposition than in apposition, more in conflict than in concert, and yet they coexist. Rather than having two concepts of gender as an either/or proposition, Torah proposes that two incommensurable stories of human creation need to be side by side, living in a tension that has yet to be resolved. We may have progressed since B'reishit in many domains, but our understanding of gender may have regressed.

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Director's Message, *continued from page 1*

Our approach to gender is consistent with the educational theory put forth in Understanding by Design, a framework for designing curriculum units. We attempt to uncover a field laden with mines and minds, incites and insights, that are articulated by women and men whose learning is infused with passion. In the spirit of eilu v'eilu divrei Elohim chayim, "These and those are words of the living God," Wendy Grinberg has edited this issue on gender to present an enduring dispute between exponents of nature and nurture, biology and sociology, crisis espousers and crisis deniers. We hope that this internal debate not only will endure but also sharpen the thinking of those engaged in the conversation.

Each of us is a prisoner of our own experience. My mother is a doctor; so was her sister and so was their mother. I grew up in a home where my mother was more highly educated and more highly compensated than my father. Undoubtedly, these factors have contributed to my own understanding of gender. The women in my personal and professional life continue in the tradition of being from Genesis 1: independent at times and interdependent at other times, relating to God and to human beings directly rather than as subordinate or subservient to any male, at least as much as I am able to discern.

Sometimes I write with the confidence of a teacher. Not this time. I am very much a student, sufficiently knowledgeable to be confused, hoping to be convinced by the clarity and cogency of an argument, open and committed to learn more and act tentatively and tolerantly—not an easy task. Soon after I began to work at the Union, I was asked a vexing question in a public forum. "Why are you, a male rabbi, serving as the director of a department in a field dominated by women who are not rabbis?" With undying gratitude to Sara Lee, I was spared from responding. She said that my selection for the post in which I continue to serve had nothing to do with my gender or ordination. I wonder.

I supervise approximately two dozen people, almost all of them women, some of them I know to be at least as capable as I am, and yet I have the big office. I have the "relatively" high salary. I am the one who will receive a Sabbatical during the first four months of 2008. I am not deaf to the implications of this line of logic. I would love to believe that Sara was right, that merit alone facilitated my professional growth, but the question remains. Please let me live with that illusion, after you read Torah at the Center and you consider your own relationship to gender and Judaism.

Perhaps my internal dialogue with gender began before I was born. My parents purposely chose an "ambisextrous" name for their adopted child, male or female—

Rabbi Jan Katzew, Ph D., RJE

Director, URJ Department of Lifelong Jewish Learning

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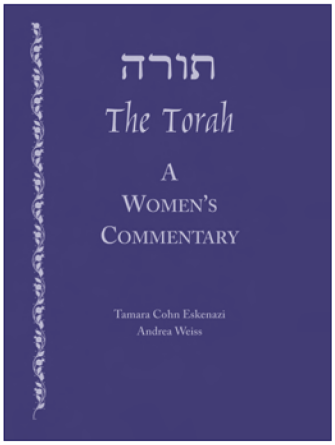
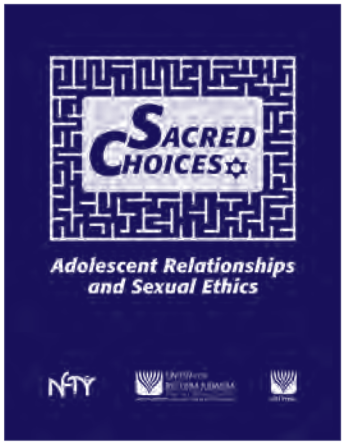
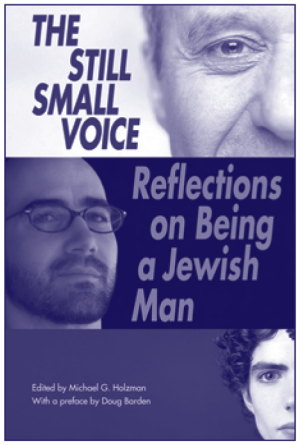
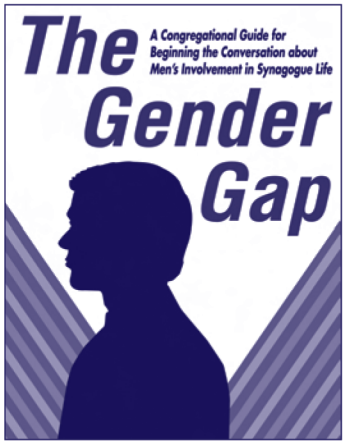
Books of Interest from URJ PRESS









The Torah: A Women's Commentary includes the work of over 100 women scholars, clergy, educators, and poets from around the world. Under editors Dr. Tamara Cohn-Eskenazi and Andrea Weiss's skillful leadership, this commentary will provide insight and inspiration for all who study Torah: men and women, Jew and non-Jew. **No. 381570 $75.00**

The ***Sacred Choices*** curricula include the materials, resources, programs and inspiration that are needed for congregational leadership to better support teens, their families, and their members through one of the challenges of adolescence. These sessions address issues pertaining to adolescent sexual development, such as peer pressure, communication and assertiveness skills. The Middle School Module is now available and the High School Module will be released this winter. (Middle School Module) **No. 540550 $49.95**

The Still Small Voice provides a thoughtful and thought-provoking snapshot of how Jewish men's lives and souls are evolving in the present moment. Included are the voices of fathers and sons, young men and older men. There are the voices of businessmen and artists, Jewish professionals and those struggling to understand their relationship to Judaism. **No. 467903 $16.95**

The Gender Gap discusses the decreased involvement in Jewish communal life on the part of both men and boys. Anecdotal information backs up this trend. There are often more women than men at services, more girls than boys in youth groups, and more women than men on synagogue boards. What is behind these numbers, and why? This book presents ideas, reflective essays, and program ideas meant to start the conversation in the synagogue about this phenomenon. There are no definite answers here, no prescriptions, rather a chance to test some ideas and begin a dialogue. **No. 467902 $25.00**

Order at URJBooksandMusic.com or 212.650.4120 URJ PRESS

Jewish Boys—A Spiritual Crisis of Disconnection: Healing the Rift Within Jewish Educational and Organizational Life

By William S. Pollack, Ph.D., Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychology, Harvard Medical School; Director, Centers for Men and Young Men, McLean Hospital; Founder, REAL BOYS® Educational Programs; and author of *Real Boys*, *Real Boys' Voices* and *Real Boys Workbook*

If I am not for myself

Who will be for me?

And if I am for myself alone, then what am I?

If not now, then when?

—Hillel

The great Jewish sage Hillel, in the first century B.C.E., opined upon what is now considered the essence of modern Jewish spiritual teaching, no matter what our denomination or eclecticism, as 21st century Jews. He made clear that if we cannot have self-esteem or personal strength in our spiritual journey, then it would be hard for others to stand for us. However, he was very clear that if we seek only our own agenda, then we are of little worth to our fellow people. And in seizing the now very special, existential idea of the moment, he exhorted us not to wait but to act now.

While Hillel's words can be understood as creating a sense of spiritual balance in a life infused with Jewish values, I excerpt them here for their particular meaning in emphasizing the present crisis among Jewish male youth (especially in less stringent halachic communities). They need for all of us who love them—men, women and girls—to reach out to them with a renewed understanding. We, in turn, need to engage in such pragmatic educational and organizational changes necessary to save our male youth from falling from our flock and losing the soulful meaningfulness that our heritage may offer them, and we need to do it now.

First, we must address the reality of the "Jewish boy crisis" that has been challenged and, I fear, too much politicized. Certainly, when I write in my secular research about boys and young males across America and here about our Jewish boys, I do so in what I refer to as a girl-affirmative, pro-feminist perspective. We have worked too long and come too far within Judaism toward recognizing and supporting our gender egalitarianism to retreat from that now. Helping boys who appear to be losing their spiritual bonds with us is not meant to diminish programs for girls or to suggest that women's greater power position in modern Judaism is problematic. Rather, it is to realize that these positive movements for girls and women in our spiritual lives never will be sustained within our educational and institutional settings if boys are allowed to flounder and become lost. And lost they are becoming.

While our gender-based data about participation in spiritual modern Jewish life still is scant, we know from numerous sources that certainly by the time of bar mitzvah, boys are becoming alienated from Jewish life, in far greater numbers than their female counterparts. Close to 50 percent of Jewish boys who become a bar mitzvah within a spiritual setting view this event not as a way station on a continuing path of the meaningfulness of unique Jewish life but, rather, as they report to researchers, their "graduation from Jewish education." A good quarter of them experience Jewish-sponsored activities as "boring"; 40-plus percent find "nothing of interest" among the spectrum of Jewish activities; and more than two-thirds experience the activities available to them as "not meaningful" and "repetitious." Hence their flight from Jewish life.

For those who wish to keep them in the fold, this is bad enough. Yet, this "anomie" about their close-surrounding world is shared with American male youth, in general, as I've found in my own Listening to Boys' Voices Study, conducted with faculty at Harvard Medical School and elsewhere throughout the United States. In the secular studies, we find this "boy disconnection" at the bedrock of increased school failure, depression, suicide and crime. Certainly there is no data yet parsed out to show such drastic effects for young Jewish males' disconnection from their spiritual heritage, but it certainly does leave them at risk for navigating the journey from boyhood to adulthood in the unprotected secular worlds that continue to define youthful masculinity as a life of bravado, stoicism and negativity. It exposes our boys prematurely and extensively to violent media images and misogynistic ideas of "relationships" with girls and side by side with homophobic fear of emotional closeness with their male peers.

In a secular world where boys are supposedly just being "boys," our Jewish youth have been cut off from the meaningful and psychologically enhancing values our

traditions can inculcate them with because they have become disconnected from the adult role models within our educational settings and institutional lives, which they find dull, stultifying and boring.

In our general research on boys in America, we discovered a number of fascinating results, which cannot be given complete justice here. However, the overwhelming myth that young males need to disconnect or "separate" from adult life to become healthy men was shown not only to be a dangerous psychological belief but antithetical to the ongoing, sustaining connections all teens require with adults—whether they be male or female. However, because of what we labeled as the "Boy Code" defining masculinity, even in 21st century America, as one of pseudo independence and stoicism, many adults, youth institutions and boys themselves become confused about how much they should remain active members of our youth movements with positive connections to male and female role models, lest they be labeled as not "real boys" or become "unhealthy" men.

While there is no way yet to know whether the myth of separation and the anomie of disconnection that ensues in secular American male youth can inform our understanding of the Jewish male spiritual crisis (more research sorely is needed), there are suggestions of significant overlap. Certainly in our learning that boys/young males and girls/young females are excited by different structured activities and that boys especially are drawn to action-oriented programs, this may help to explain some of Jewish male youths' disappointment with the present programs we provide for them. For after all, this is not a "boy" problem in Jewish spiritual life. It is an adult problem in understanding boys' needs and meeting them in ways that help them to reconnect with the meaningful experience of Jewish traditions—and have fun while doing it. In fact, in our findings about "action talk" and "action empathy," we were far from seeing or suggesting increased aggression (which too many youth workers—secular or spiritual—expect from boys) but rather recognizing the life-sustaining distinction between creating programs encased around action with healthy messages vs. disconnected bravado-aggression that occurs when we, as adults, lose our emotional and spiritual connections with the males of our next generation.

There is so much more to say and so much more to learn. There are possibilities gained from our research to be "action tested." There also is a need to listen openly to Jewish boys' voices—whether it be through their words or deeds—in order to revamp our educational and youth institutional settings to heal their disconnection and welcome them back among us.

When the Creator called out to our Avot v'Imahot, our ancestors, they replied with the beautiful biblical spiritual phrase: Hineni: "Here I am for you in body and spirit." Boys as much as girls yearn for our continued connection during their adolescent journeys to Jewish adulthood. Our Jewish boys are calling out to us in negative and positive ways; sometimes in their words, but often through their actions, "Are you there for us?"

Is our generation going to begin searching our own souls and learning new methods for being able to respond genuinely, saying and "doing" hineni in a manner that will bring our young males back to us? Or, will we continue in outmoded programs, methods and ideas that only alienate our male youth and leave them wandering in the wilderness, feeling that we have walked away, in the wrong direction. The choice is ours, and in the words of our sage of blessed memory, "If not now then when?"

The author would like to acknowledge his collaboration with Moving Traditions and especially his connection with Deborah Meyer in working toward understanding the modern needs of Jewish boys.

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Midrashic Clues for a Gendered Reading of *Matan Torah*

By Gail Twersky Reimer, Ph.D., Founding Director, Jewish Women's Archive, Brookline, Mass.

When thinking of a Jewishly defining text to spearhead a discussion of Judaism and gender, I immediately am drawn to the story of Sinai, the Torah's primal description of God's revelation to the people of Israel on Mount Sinai. I think in particular of the Torah reading from Parashat Yitro, Exodus 19-20, which we will read very soon in our annual cycle and will revisit again on the holiday of Shavuot, the festival celebrating the giving of our Torah.

This section from Parashat Yitro, when studied carefully in a school or adult educational context, offers teachers a special opportunity for introducing gender into a discussion that fosters critical reading and thinking, while also highlighting a provocative source for the equitable and inclusive Judaism we are dedicated to promoting in our classrooms and synagogues.

In a paper he delivered several years ago, Professor Marc Brettler of Brandeis University recalls how, as the product of a decade of primary and secondary day-school education, he was able to rattle off the Ten Commandments from memory. Yet, only as an adult and only when he reread this text within the context of a course he was teaching on "Women and the Bible," did the issue of "to whom is the decalogue addressed" strike him as problematic:

The significance of its last law hit me with astounding power: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female slave, or his ox, or his ass or anything that is your neighbor's." Clearly, it is only the male Israelites who are being addressed here, an idea that is reinforced by part of the framework of the decalogue.

Brettler points us to Exodus 19:15, which notes of Moses, "And he said to the people, 'Be ready for the third day: Do not go near a woman.'" This verse is even more distressing, he concludes, for it clearly suggests an equation: biblical people = men.

This point is elaborated upon by Judith Plaskow in Standing Again at Sinai. "Were this passage simply the record of an historical event long in the past," Plaskow writes, "the exclusion of women from this critical juncture would be troubling but also comprehensible for its time." The story of Sinai is recited twice each year, and with each recitation, Plaskow notes, "[Women] ... hear ourselves thrust aside anew, eavesdropping on a conversation among men and between men and God."

It is not just the recitation of the story that renders problematic the address of the decalogue to men alone. The very way we teach Revelation to our students, emphasizing Sinai as a continuous event and Torah-learning as our continued participation in Revelation, invites our students to hear these words as addressed to them. Surely we don't want our girls or women to feel excluded by them.

Our rabbis and teachers have two choices before them. They can teach this text year after year and simply hope that students don't notice the invisibility of women, or they can acknowledge the problem in the text and draw on midrash to turn the problem into an occasion for understanding how gender issues can be handled to promote everyone's learning and a sense of inclusion for all students in their classes and study halls.

Let me try to outline what the second alternative could look like by examining the question of "to whom is the decalogue addressed" more carefully. The issue is first raised in Exodus 20:1, well before the final commandment. The introductory statement, God "spoke all these words saying," is unique in Torah in that it does not indicate to whom God is speaking. The lack of an indirect object in the divine declaration here contrasts markedly with the specificity with which God charges Moses to prepare the people for the reception of the Ten Commandments.

At the beginning of Exodus 19, God speaks through Moses and says: "Thus shall you say to the House of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel." In contrast, when God speaks directly, without mediation, the divine words are addressed to neither the House of Jacob, nor the House of Israel. When we teach this particular detail, we often will relate it to the lack of specificity in the text about time and place. (We hear much about the third day but not third from what; we hear much about the mountain, but its precise locale is nowhere specified.) All these aspects of the text work towards reinforcing the significance of Sinai as a timeless and continuous event. The divine words are

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addressed to no one in particular, and as a consequence, they are addressed to all who hear them, whenever they hear them.

How the divine words are heard is also extremely significant. An explanation of God's speech in Midrash Rabbah is instructive:

Come and see how the voice went forth—coming to each Israelite according to his individual strength—to the old, according to their strength; to the young according to their strength; to the children according to their strength; to the infants according to their strength; and to the women according to their strength; and even to Moses according to his strength, as it is said, "Moses spoke and God answered him by a voice," that is with a voice which he could endure.

This midrash represents the experience of Revelation as differentiated according to the particularities of one's time in life. In so doing, it opens the way for an understanding of Revelation as differentiated according to the particularities of one's time in history. So, while the midrash recognizes that the adult will experience Revelation and hear Torah differently from the child, it also suggests the possibility that today's child (a child growing up in a culture that takes gender issues seriously) is likely to hear Torah differently from his or her own father and mother, and certain to hear it differently than his or her grandparents. Understanding of Torah changes over time, over a lifetime and over historical time.

The midrash also represents the experience of Revelation as differentiated according to gender. Most likely the midrash understands women along with infants and children as representing particular stages of moral development—that is, as limited in their capacity to engage in higher-order thinking. Whatever the midrash intended, I think we can use it as a proof text for recognizing gender as a worthwhile category to bring to bear on this study of Torah. The fact that one's stage in life necessarily affects one's experiences of Revelation is a guiding principle of our education system. But the fact that one's gender also affects how we experience Revelation and Torah is something we only are beginning to acknowledge. Rather than asking women and girls to leave their "experience as females" aside and engage Torah as non-gendered persons, we should be attentive to their needs, to their yearning to be visible, to their longing to hear the voices and stories of women, to their desire to hear a voice that speaks to them.

Unfortunately, paying attention to gender needs will not do away with the problem of women's exclusion from this core text with which we began. Let me conclude by outlining how a close reading of the text might help.

Notice that in Chapter 19, verse 11, God instructs Moses to "Go to the people and warn them to stay pure today and tomorrow. Let them wash their clothes. Let them be ready for the third day." But something changes in the human transmission of these instructions. What Moses says to the people is, "Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman." As he elaborates upon God's words, Moses renders women invisible. We might ask our students to pay attention to what happens in the transmission, to notice that it is not God who renders women invisible but Moses. His repetition of God's words is actually an interpretation of them according to the mores and language of his time. Most important, we might encourage students to hear God directly and put God's command in their own words. We might reformulate God's command for them or with them in words that encompass a contemporary world view, in words that address women as well as men.

A close reading of the text enables us to suggest to students that the exclusion of women here (and elsewhere in Torah) has its source in human interpretation rather than in the Divine word. Teaching that promotes this kind of close reading makes room for women to acknowledge the pain of hearing themselves excluded, but it also makes it possible for them to move beyond that pain and recover the word of God for themselves. Simultaneously, men might begin to hear and understand women's pain at exclusion and as a result become more sensitive and inclusive interpreters of God's word and Jewish tradition. One of the central tasks for our generation of Jewish educators is to alter the pattern by sensitizing our students to the roots and consequences of women's exclusion from Sinai and inspiring them to imagine and desire a differently interpreted Sinai that genuinely makes us all equally open to the word of God.

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Gender Debates in Adult Jewish Education: Past and Present

By Shulamit Reinharz, Ph.D., Jacob Potofsky Professor of Sociology; Founding Director, Women's Studies Research Center; Founding Director, Hadassah-Brandeis Institute; Brandeis University, Waltham, Mass.

The attraction of women to adult Jewish education in the United States is a current fact of life. As Dr. Steven M. Cohen of the HUC-JIR/New York and Aryeh Davidson of the Jewish Theological Seminary reported from a national sample of 1,302 adults, women are more likely than men to be engaged in adult Jewish learning. For some scholars, women's heightened educational involvement represents a glorious new moment in Jewish history. For others, this fact is framed as a problem. As women's interest grows, some fear that they are driving men away. Or, to put it differently, the more women there are in Jewish adult education, the less likely men will want to participate.

Only longitudinal research will be able to demonstrate if this pattern will be an empirical fact, and if so, how it will function. We then can determine if there is a gender participation tipping point in mixed-gender adult Jewish education, and if there is, we can see if the tipping point can be halted or reversed. With research, we will be able to determine if the pattern is temporary or long term. We then will be able to address the new hypothesis that men are interested in Judaism only if they are in charge and in a single-sex situation.

The second set of hypotheses is even more challenging and concerns the nature of gender differences themselves. Do women learn better than men as adults or vice versa? Is there a women's "way of learning" that designers of adult-education programs have embedded unwittingly, that makes the learning opportunities more suited to women? Most broadly, what do social scientists know about gender differences? Are men and women different, and if so, how? If there are no hardwired differences, why does the idea about gender differences persist in our society?

One of my close colleagues at the Women's Studies Research Center (WSRC) at Brandeis University is social psychologist Dr. Rosalind Barnett, who has devoted her life to scientific research on possible gender differences. In 2004, capping a career of dozens of outstanding, federally funded studies, Dr. Barnett published (with Caryl Rivers) Same Difference: How Gender Myths Are Hurting Our Relationships, Our Children and Our Jobs. Simply put, Barnett demonstrates that psychological studies never have been able to confirm differences in abilities or learning styles of men and women, although the public would like to think otherwise. These studies have been undertaken in the United States since approximately 1890, and many meta-analyses and literature reviews exist that substantiate this conclusion.

Yet, books such as Erik Erikson's Identity and the Life Cycle (1959), Carol Gilligan's In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development (1982), Deborah Tannen's You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation (1990) and John Gray's Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus (1993) claim robust differences. It is important to state emphatically that none of these studies has withstood critical examination. Facts on the ground also belie the myth of gender differences in learning. Were women to have demonstrable intellectual deficiencies and a need for alternative teaching methods, women's colleges would not be able to produce skilled graduates unless they were largely different from co-ed schools—which they are not; and women would be unable to compete effectively with men in all the other colleges, medical schools, business schools, law schools and more. Women would not be able to lead countries, serve as political analysts, build bombs or plan cities. Nor would men be able to care effectively for children. None of this is the case. Gender differences in performance reflect opportunity, not biology or ability.

Given the lack of scientific evidence for innate behavioral or cognitive differences between women and men, I turn to the past decade's historical and sociological studies to understand the culturally based gender differences that have emerged. This information underscores my previous point about the significance of opportunities in shaping women's involvement in Jewish education.

When men and their reference to Jewish law denied Jewish girls and women the opportunity to engage in study because of its interference with childbearing or economic activity, they were rendering women "special" in a negative way, less intellectually competent, primarily private and in a sense, less fully Jewish (Rochelle L. Millen, Women, Birth and Death in Jewish Law and Practice, p. 5). Later the argument changed. Adult women's learning became directed toward a specific employment purpose, such as becoming an

educator. Similarly, women's learning became sanctioned within women's-only organizational contexts, such as a study group within Hadassah. Subsequently a new model arose by which Jewish women engaged in learning for the sake of becoming an adult bat mitzvah or for being able to participate more fully in their children's b'nei mitzvah ceremonies. Now Jewish women engage in learning for its own sake in mixed gender groups.

The decrease in the birthrate, which gives women more time for education, the move to the suburbs, which propels women to find new ways of exercising their talents, and the increase in opportunities for secular education that began in late 19th century America with the rise of women's colleges, are all factors that contribute to Jewish women's high rates of involvement in Jewish learning.

A few particularities in Jewish women's learning also have emerged in a study by Professor Jack Wertheimer of the Jewish Theological Seminary and his team. The authors found that Jewish women want their learning experiences to focus on issues relevant to women. After noting that Jewish women and girls enjoy unprecedented access to Jewish education, the study reported, "Women still want more education about Jewish women for themselves and their children." In particular, they want Jewish education to include gender analyses of Jewish text, culture and history. The women seeking opportunities to learn believe that they must acquire Jewish knowledge and ritual skills to become credible as leaders. (p. 113) [Emphases added]

Leadership is now a professed goal, and denial of access to leadership is a source of frustration to Jewish women. Many people are aware that women are eager consumers of Jewish education today. But, whether there will be a long-lasting gender imbalance, with women's presence creating a redefinition of Judaism as the domain of women, is open to debate.

The May 2007 issue of 614: the HBI ezine is devoted to this debate (see www.brandeis.edu/hbi/614). Most of the contributors who weigh in about the permanence of the gender imbalance agree on two points. First, we have seen this gender imbalance before in American Jewish history, so we do not have to panic that men will desert Judaism forever. And second, we have to create men-only spaces, just as we did women-only educational spaces in the last few decades. Throughout history, each debate creates a new resolution, which in turn becomes the genesis of a new reaction and debate. Gender concerns in adult Jewish education are a telling example of this process that will continue to unfold.

This article will appear as a longer chapter in the upcoming book What We NOW Know about Jewish Education: Perspectives on Research for Practice. (Goodman, R.L., Flexner, P.A. and Bloomberg, L.D. (Eds.), Torah Aura Productions, Los Angeles 2008.)

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The Male and Female Mind

By Simon Baron-Cohen, Ph. D., Cambridge University, and author of *The Essential Difference*

A new theory claims that the female brain is predominantly hard-wired for empathy and the male brain is predominantly hard-wired for understanding and building systems. It is known as the empathizing-systemizing (E-S) theory. Empathizing is the drive to identify another person's emotions and thoughts and to respond to these with an appropriate emotion. Systemizing is the drive to analyze and explore a system, to extract underlying rules that govern the behavior of a system; it is also the drive to construct systems.

The evidence for a female advantage in empathizing comes from many different directions. For example, baby girls, as young as 12 months old, respond more empathetically to the distress of other people, showing greater concern through more sad looks, sympathetic vocalizations and comforting. This echoes what you find in adulthood: More women report sharing frequently the emotional distress of their friends. Women also show more comfort than men do. When asked to judge when someone might have said something potentially hurtful (a faux pas), girls score higher from at least 7 years old. Women also are more sensitive to facial expressions. They are better at decoding nonverbal communication, picking up subtle nuances from tone of voice or facial expression, or judging a person's character. Men, on the other hand, show far more "direct" aggression (pushing, hitting, punching). Such sex differences in empathy are evident by 12 months of age, when girls make more eye contact than boys. A study from Cambridge University shows that at birth girls look longer at a face.

The evidence for a male advantage in systemizing includes the conclusion that boys, from toddler-hood onwards, are more interested in cars, trucks, planes, guns and swords, building blocks, constructional toys and mechanical toys—systems. They seem to love putting things together, to build toy towers or towns or vehicles. The same sort of pattern is seen in the adult workplace. Some occupations are almost entirely male: Metalworking, weapon-making, the crafting of musical instruments, boat-building. The focus of these occupations is on constructing systems. Professions such as maths, physics and engineering, which require high systemizing, also are largely male-chosen disciplines. Reading maps has been used as another test of systemizing. Men can learn a route in fewer trials, just from looking at a map, correctly recalling more details about direction and distance. The male preference for focusing on systems, again, is evident very early. The Cambridge study found that at 1 year old, little boys showed a stronger preference to watch a film of cars (mechanical systems) than a film of a person's face (with much emotional expression). And at 1 day old, little boys look for longer at a mechanical mobile.

Culture and socialization play a role in determining if you develop a male brain (stronger interest in systems) or female brain (stronger interest in empathy). But, these studies of infancy strongly suggest that biology also partly determines this. Some of the most convincing evidence for biological causes comes from studies of the effects of hormones. If a female rat is injected at birth with testosterone, she shows faster, more accurate maze learning, compared to a female rat that has not been given such an injection. Consequently, masculinizing the rat hormonally improves her spatial systemizing. Another Cambridge study found that toddlers who had lower fetal testosterone had higher levels of eye contact and better empathy, while those who had higher fetal testosterone had stronger interests in systems.

The E-S theory does not stereotype. It simply shows how on average the two sexes differ. And, it draws attention to how an individual may be typical or atypical for his or her sex. Judaism long has celebrated the two sexes being both similar and distinct, and it traditionally values both sexes for their contributions. The lesson from the E-S theory for education, including Jewish education, is not to presume anything about a person's mind based on his or her sex. It is essential to recognize if a person is more of an empathizer or more of a systemizer, as one's learning style will be very different. A systemizer will find information that is structured and rule-based and unambiguous much easier to learn. An empathizer will find a relaxed, chatty format, replete with social contact and affirmation, much more conducive to learning. The empathizer will be able to cope with far more ambiguity because the world of emotions intrinsically is more speculative and more subjective.

Jewish teaching recognizes the value of both empathy and systemizing. If humanity lacked empathy, at stake would be human compassion for other's suffering. At the same time, if humanity lacked systemizing, we would have no mathematics, no technology, no science and no legal systems.

Gender, Transgender, Gender Variance and Jewish Educators

By Stephanie Brill, Director, Gender Spectrum Education and Training, Orinda, Calif.

I facilitate a support group through Children's Hospital Oakland for parents of gender-variant[1] and transgender[2] children and teens. One of the interesting phenomena within the group is that a very large percentage of the members is Jewish. Whenever I ask, "Why do you think this is?" to Jewish educators or Jewish people, they practically roll their eyes at me and say something to the effect of Jews being liberal, inclusive people who naturally support their children. But, when I mention to adult gay and lesbian Jews over 30 that I have been doing gender trainings at local religious schools, they have many stories to share about the gender oppression they experienced in religious school and how that has affected their own experience of being Jewish. For many, it drove them running from their connection to being Jewish, feeling they were oppressed by the rigid gender roles presented to them.

In the Bay Area there are a number of religious schools that have transgender and gender-variant educators at their schools. And yet, there is still concern and hesitation about how and if to discuss this topic. I have met parents of transgender youth who are very concerned that their child will not be able to celebrate becoming a bar or bat mitzvah at their current congregation, wondering if they should even reveal their child's transgender status to the religious school at all for fear of discrimination. Just as many congregations have made an effort to be welcoming to gays and lesbians, it is essential to make the same overtures when it comes to the spectrum of gender diversity.

Below are some fast and easy steps that every religious school can do to send a clear message that it welcomes gender-diverse families and students:

- Include gender expression and gender identity in the official school nondiscrimination policy.
- Make sure that your forms are gender neutral and leave room for disclosure about gender identity, such as: male, female and transgender, along with a few lines for any comments.
- Many transgender students do not use their legal names. On school forms it is helpful to ask everyone, "What name do you prefer to be called?" and "What pronoun (he or she) do want people to use to refer to you?"
- Use the school newsletter to write a yearly blurb about gender diversity at your congregation.
- Have at least one private, gender-neutral bathroom available for everyone, and make sure it is marked.
- Provide trainings for your staff each year about gender diversity and how to handle it directly in the religious school setting.
- Step in if any student is being teased, pressured or harassed about their gender presentation or gender identity.
- Have local resources and referrals available for parents and students regarding transgender and gender variance.

Once these are in place, there certainly are additional steps that any religious school can take that indicate a willingness to embrace gender diversity within the school itself, such as:

- Hiring gender-diverse staff
- Having gender-diverse Jewish adults speak to the students about gender diversity in age-appropriate ways
- Discussing how Jewish rituals can include transgender people
- Having books written by Jewish gender and transgender activists in your libraries
- Sponsoring gender education and awareness events
- Looking for gender variance in Jewish texts and exploring them together

As much as many synagogues have incorporated the historic Jewish women into their modern prayers and that some synagogues use feminine words for God, it is time for Jewish practices to continue in the blending of past and present and to recognize the range of the gender spectrum in Jewish education. Let all Jews continue to speak out in support of the oppressed and help to make this world a more welcoming experience for all. It is no accident that a very high percentage of the young children who are supported in their transgender identity come from Jewish families. Now it is time for the Jewish community as a whole to embrace this face of Judaism as well.

[1] Also called gender nonconformity, gender variance refers to persistent behaviors and interests that fit outside of what we consider "normal" for a child's assigned biological sex.

[2] This term refers to an individual whose gender identity does not match his or her assigned birth gender. Transgender people additionally may identify as straight, gay, lesbian or bisexual.

Boys Adrift: The Five Factors Driving the Growing Epidemic of Unmotivated Boys and Underachieving Young Men

By Leonard Sax, M.D., Ph.D., Executive Director, National Association for Single Sex Public Education and author of *Why Gender Matters*

I have been a practicing physician for 21 years. For the past 17 years, I have worked in a suburb of Washington, D.C. Ten years ago, I began noticing something odd. I'd find a family where the daughter was motivated, hardworking and successful, while her brother was an underachiever. I now have documented this pattern dozens of times in my own practice. In the past seven years, I have visited more than 200 schools around the United States, Canada and Australia. I have met with teachers, spoken with parents, and I have listened to children and teenagers from every demographic group. What's going on?

Following are five factors that are driving this phenomenon:

1) Changes in education. Over the past 30 years, American education has undergone three major changes that have had the unintended consequence of turning boys off school. Here we have space to talk about just one of those changes, namely: the acceleration of the early elementary curriculum. Thirty years ago, kindergarten typically was about activities such as finger painting, playing duck-duck-goose, singing in rounds, going on a field trip to splash in a pond and chase after tadpoles. Today, kindergarten is primarily about learning to read and write. In other words, the kindergarten curriculum in 2007 looks suspiciously like the first-grade curriculum in 1977. That acceleration of the early elementary curriculum took place without any awareness of recent neuroanatomical research showing that the different regions of the brain develop in a different sequence in girls compared with boys. The language area in the brain of a typical 5-year-old boy, according to a large National Institutes of Health (NIH) study published in 2006, looks very much like the language area in the brain of a 3½-year-old girl. Many 5-year-olds are simply not ready to sit for hours, learning to read and write—not because they're dumb but because they are boys. The result is that for many young boys, the first experience of school is a turnoff.

2) Video games. The average American boy spends 13 hours a week playing video games, compared to less than 5 hours per week for girls. That figure does not include time spent watching television. We now have some extraordinary brain research demonstrating that boys who spend more than eight hours a week playing video games—which means, the majority of American boys—actually atrophy the area of the brain involved in motivation and concentration. They are more likely to prefer video games to reading a book and more likely to be diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), which leads to the next factor.

3) Medications for ADHD. In affluent suburbs, as many as 1-in-3 Caucasian boys today is taking a medication such as Adderall, Ritalin, Concerta or Metadate. Recent research from Harvard University and other prestigious research institutions suggests that when these "academic steroids" are administered at an early age, the result may be damage to the nucleus accumbens. The nucleus accumbens plays no role in cognition. The function of the nucleus accumbens is to translate motivation into action. If a boy has a damaged nucleus accumbens, he'll look fine and he'll feel fine, but he'll be lazy—particularly if he stops taking those medications.

4) Endocrine disruptors in the environment. The average young man in the United States today has a sperm count less than half what his grandfather had at the same age. And, a typical boy in the United States today is more than twice as likely to break a bone compared with a boy 30 years ago, although the boy today is less active. Researchers such as Dr. Shanna Swan at the University of Rochester have traced these changes to endocrine disruptors in the food our children eat and the water they drink. For example: What's the composition of that clear plastic bottle in which your water is bottled? That bottle is made out of polyethylene terephthalate, a substance that mimics the action of female hormones. The result of drinking water out of clear plastic bottles is not only lower sperm counts and brittle bones but diminished motivation and drive. That effect is seen only in boys, not in girls. Recent studies show that endocrine disruptors lead to derangement of the motivational system in boys but not in girls. (In girls, these substances accelerate the onset of puberty and may increase the risk of breast cancer later in life.)

5) The decline and disintegration of the masculine ideal. Forty years ago, popular evening TV shows included Father Knows Best and My Three Sons. Twenty years ago, The Cosby Show was a leading sitcom. Today, the most successful evening comedy show is The Simpsons. We've gone from Ward Cleaver to Homer Simpson in little more than one generation. I don't believe that these shows caused the change in the way that men are viewed in our culture, but I do think that television and other aspects of popular culture reflect changing views of masculinity. Today, a boy doesn't get much constructive guidance about what it means to be "a real man." He can choose between boobs like Homer Simpson or slackers like the Matthew McConaughey character in Failure to Launch, or he can choose a thug or a bully as his role model, such as the personae portrayed by male pop stars Akon, 50 Cent and Eminem.

In my upcoming book, Boys Adrift: The Five Factors Driving the Growing Epidemic of Unmotivated Boys, one conclusion I offer based on recent work at hundreds of schools (both public schools and independent schools) here in the United States is that many boys who disengage from school in a coed context do much better at all-boys schools. Perhaps it is time to experiment with single-sex education in Reform Jewish settings. There are options to consider, such as single-sex classrooms within coed schools. Schools also may offer single-sex classrooms without insisting on single-sex worship. These kinds of solutions should be investigated to combat the disengagement of men and boys from education and from Jewish life.

Using Dramatic Arts to Portray a Positive Image of Jewish Women

By Elaine Rembrandt, actress and author of *Heroes, Heroines and Holidays: Plays for Jewish Youth*, Cleveland

Twenty years ago, when there was a proliferation of JAP jokes demeaning Jewish women, at first I laughed, but then I began to see the jokes as anti-Semitic and even smacking of self-loathing. I had just finished performing the title role in William Gibson's play Golda to a sold-out run and was filled with the euphoria of having crawled into the skin of a Jewish woman that made me very proud. The avaricious, self-absorbed and materialistic women described in the jokes did not describe the Jewish women I knew. My Jewish women friends are all educated, hardworking, interesting people who defy those stereotypes. It also bothered me that a woman with these qualities who was not even Jewish could be labeled a JAP.

To fight these stereotypes I created a one-woman show that would celebrate the accomplishments of Jewish women through history. It is called Courage and Commitment: A Legacy for Jewish Women.

The show begins with the story of the biblical judge Deborah, a woman who had more insight and chutzpah than any of the men of her day and formulated a plan to rid the Hebrews of the scourge of the Caananites. She rode into battle alongside the men and gave them the courage to carry out their mission. Then I tell the story of Dona Gracia Nasi Mendes, who was one of the greatest Jewish businesswomen and philanthropists in history. Born to a Converso family of wealth and position, she inherited a vast international banking fortune as a result of the untimely deaths of both her husband and his brother. Fleeing the terror of the Inquisition that condemned her as a Secret Jew and confiscated her fortune for the Church, she moved her household from country to country until finally finding sanctuary in Turkey. Never forsaking her Jewish heritage, she made a deal with the Sultan of Turkey to create a safe city for Jews in the city of Tiberius in the Palestine. She built industry, homes and yeshivas, and she built a wall around the city for protection, some of which still stands today. At the same time, she used her fortune to ransom Jews from the Inquisition, buying the safety of hundreds of Jews. When she died, she was mourned in every city in which Jews lived.

Next, the play highlights Emma Lazarus. A prolific and highly regarded poet and writer, Lazarus championed better living conditions for the influx of Eastern-European refugees at the turn of the century. She always was proud of having helped to start the Hebrew Technical School to aid these immigrants in earning a livelihood. She also was an early Zionist, espousing through her writings the need for a national Jewish homeland. The show ends with me once again portraying Golda Meir.

I found audiences of Jewish women hungry for the knowledge and the inspiration that these stories brought them. Jewish women are tired of being demeaned and written off as insignificant or worse. Jewish women throughout history have taken an active part in the life of their communities in everything from politics, to business to philanthropy. Even today, Jewish women not only raise families but also work full- or part-time jobs and still involve themselves in myriad organizations that work to better living conditions for everyone. Our heritage is one of education and tikkun olam. So, I continue traveling with my one-person shows to help undo the damage and the humiliation.

My latest play is called Unlikely Heroes: The True Stories of Three Jewish Women Spies. It has taken me three years to find the stories, compile the information and create the show, but the stories are amazing! I have had the privilege of meeting and interviewing two of the three women who still are living today.

The stories we tell can transform our reality. It is the stories that connect us, that teach us, that make us aware and proud of whom we are as Jewish women, and that provide us with a link to our past and to future generations of Jewish women. Through drama, I have found a way to empower and celebrate Jewish women.

Male Gender Awareness

By Rabbi Michael Garret Holzman, Congregation Rodeph Shalom, Philadelphia

Since the onset of the feminist movement in the 1970s, women have begun to occupy all roles of our committees, synagogues, regional boards and national organizations. While glass ceilings still remain, the tide of equal opportunity and access continues to rise, and the lessons of gender equity are accepted by almost all members of our communities. The Reform Movement has led valiantly the religious world by including women in almost every area of synagogue and movement life.

While women have created Rosh Chodesh groups, women's liturgy, new women's life-cycle ceremonies or even a women's tikkun olam committee to focus on issues like breast cancer, men continue largely to ignore the spiritual significance of gender. We have heard feminism's call for equal access, but some of us have failed to heed completely a central part of the feminist message: Gender matters. It affects the way we see the world, relate to community and connect with God. Gender influences our self-awareness, our personal relationships and our intimacies. We do not argue here that men deserve greater inclusion. Instead, men should consider how significantly masculinity affects the way we live our Jewish lives.

Books on Jewish masculinity have been appearing since 1988, beginning with Harry Brod's A Mensch Among Men. While books may ponder intellectually Jewish manhood, their readers have yet to incorporate those ideas into the way we run our synagogues. As synagogue attendance (and even youth-group participation) becomes increasingly female, perhaps we should consider how our communities could better speak to men's souls. Just as women have a need to speak of women's programs, services and groups, so too do men have a similar need.

Some fear that the creation of male spaces means a slide back to female exclusion, but this fear reflects a perspective that has not absorbed fully the power of the feminist shift in the Jewish community. In today's community, to imagine that men have the power to exclude preserves the vision of men as the normative bearers of Jewish tradition, an antiquated perspective that few of us would consciously accept. Building awareness of male spiritual needs into our program has no more power to exclude than the same awareness of female needs. By consciously speaking of men in gendered terms, we elevate the awareness that both men and women have particular needs.

An example of this type of thinking surfaced recently when a student at HUC-JIR asked, "Does anyone really believe that the simchat bat is equal to a bris?" We have been aiming for more than three decades to create a female ceremony equal to the male b'rit milah, yet equality for baby girls remains elusive because we miss the blatant point staring us right in the face as we expose the genitals of our baby boys. This is a male covenant ceremony. Even if we think circumcision is barbaric, we all can agree that it is male. In our well-meaning attempts to promote equality and erase gender difference, we pretend that the gender of this ritual is invisible, and in doing so, we preserve its status as normative in the Jewish tradition. Today we surely do not deny the covenant to baby girls and adult women, yet the male covenant ceremony remains normative.

By overtly treating a b'rit milah as a male ceremony, we do not exclude women any more than does the anatomy of the ritual. Instead we acknowledge the one-sidedness of milah, which, in turn, acknowledges the Jewish universality of b'rit. In addition, creating a consciously male ceremony—by recognizing men in the community, honoring fathers, grandfathers, uncles, brothers and sons, inventing male symbols and rituals, and blessing our sons with the names of men in our tradition "like Ephraim and Menasseh"—reminds everyone in the room, male and female, of the centrality of gender to identity. And by honoring the particularity of identity, we speak to the individual's experience of God.

The b'rit milah serves as only one discrete example of the way that playing down the male aspects of some traditions diminishes the efficacy of Judaism for men and further marginalizes women. When men fully adopt the lessons of feminism and learn a language of meaning that honors masculinity, not only will we achieve full equality for women, but we will better serve, heal and uplift the male soul.

Torah at the Center

Teaching About Gender and God

By Rabbi Elyse M. Goldstein, Rabbinic Director and Rosh Yeshiva, Kolel: The Adult Centre for Liberal Jewish Learning, Toronto

Teaching about God may be the hardest part of the lesson plan, but when you add the question of gender it becomes even more daunting. As we grow up and grow out of childhood notions about God, we often have nothing mature or sophisticated to replace them with, and that is the real root of the "search for spirituality" we find so common today. The beliefs we educators foster in children through the way we talk about God may be, for many of them, the most lasting theological notions they have well into adulthood. Thus, in adult education we spend a great deal of time helping adults unlearn what they learned as children. Often I find myself "unteaching" some hazy memory of a Jewish life frozen at the age of 13. Our challenge is to examine carefully just what theological legacy we are leaving Reform Jewish children.

Because we can't teach people what to believe, the best we can do is to teach the power and creativity of the metaphors of faith. Our human language is so limited that we get caught in it. We are trapped in the one dimensionality of the prayer book and in the anthropomorphism of the Torah, in God's hands and ears and even heart. And because we are imprisoned in the limitations of human language, our prison walls are male.

If you don't want to teach about God as the "old man with a beard on a throne," you can't say "He." Male imagery of God continues to shape the way we think about God, Judaism, and the role of men and women altogether in Jewish religious life. As teachers and role models, what we say about God matters.

Language both reflects and creates reality. When I was growing up, a firefighter was a "fireman." If a woman held that job, we called her a "lady fireman" because we could not picture how a fireman could be anything but a man. Because language reflects reality, the vocabulary of a woman functioning in that job reflected the paradox of a woman doing a man's job; therefore she was a "lady fireman." But language also creates reality. I knew I couldn't be a firefighter—because a fireman is a man. God language is not a trivial matter because language is a player in tikkun olam. We have to "talk our walk."

English is a non-gendered language, and it seems easy to use neutral terms for God, such as "Ruler" for "King" and "Parent" for "Father," as almost all Reform synagogues do. Yet, such neutralization works only when the listeners divest themselves of all male stereotypes and archetypes, so that the word "parent" does not automatically conjure up a father, either heavenly or human.

The real challenge of course is Hebrew. We still need to teach that melech means "king" because we want the children to learn Hebrew properly. However, if we teach them the art of translation and of using many words to translate one idea, then they will know that melech literally means "king," but they will be exploring what a king does and finding new ways to translate melech with integrity.

As teachers, the first step is to acknowledge this difficulty and ask ourselves a series of questions. Do we rest on the old stereotypes of God as some grand magician by the way we teach the stories of Egypt? Do we conjure up God as a heavenly puppeteer, pulling the strings up there, when we talk about birth and death? Do we Judaize a Santa Claus figure—"He knows if you've been naughty, he knows if you've been nice"—and give to children a sanitized grandfather figure that ends up disappointing grown-ups because life is not always nice? Have we as teachers let go of our old childhood models so we can teach new ones? Our own struggles with God concepts touched by the gender question may just be the best lesson plan of all.

From "Queen" to "Nobody": A Language for Discussing Healthy Relationships

By Dr. Shira D. Epstein, Assistant Professor of Jewish Education, Jewish Theological Seminary, New York

A sixth grade synagogue school class reads aloud verses from M'gillat Esther describing Vashti's refusal to come at the king's demand and the resulting royal edict stating that Vashti shall never again enter the presence of the king. Students inquire, "What happens next to Vashti?" The teacher instructs them to create a midrashic interpretation depicting Vashti's fate, and they excitedly set to work showing her as "dead." One girl, Tamar, interjects, "No, she's not dead. She lost her status, we need to show that." She says firmly, "She was a queen…now she's a 'nobody.'" They ultimately display Vashti as begging in the marketplace, ignored and alone.

Tamar's naming of Vashti's lost status was not an accident; it resulted from prior class activities. As the teacher-researcher, I had facilitated drama exercises in which students depicted images of what they perceived as high/low status pairs (beggar and businessperson; popular and unpopular student). We had discussed what it feels like to be labeled by another as "low status" and had explored body language for feeling powerful vs. nonpowerful, weak vs. strong. Tamar used the language of status to describe Vashti's fate when she lost agency in her relationship with the king.

I often introduce this Purim text to initiate discussions with young people about the dynamics of gender in relationships. As educators, we need to introduce a vocabulary for talking about relationships of all kinds, including friendships. In Jewish Women International's Strong Girls curriculum, the Genesis verses describing Sarai and her maidservant Hagar are used as an entry point in exploring what it feels like to be "lowered in esteem" by a peer and to discuss popularity as connected to status. I find that "status" is an indispensable word for helping teens to offer their perceptions of power and control, as well as to describe the positive elements of equality in everyday interactions with peers.

In her book The Soul of Education, Rachael Kessler explains that while certain subjects may appear extraneous to religious education, attention to socio-emotional learning, "caring about the inner lives of our students," complements the overarching goal of spiritual education. (p. 159) Rabbi Eric Yoffie, asserts that Jewish educators support teens by "apply[ing] the insights of our tradition to the real issues that they confront." (Reform Judaism Magazine, Spring 2006) Our texts can be used as entry points to dialogue about the critical factor of partnership in relationships, and educators can integrate curricular pieces that emphasize modern Judaism's value of relationships of equality, self-respect and mutual respect. Schoolgirls author Peggy Orenstein explains that self-esteem stems from self-knowledge; as learners name aloud the characteristics they believe make them special, they are better prepared to recognize when they are in a relationship that leaves them consistently feeling lowered in esteem, as "low status." When they are guided to develop a mental image of their strongest selves, they then can surround themselves with people who value the unique inner qualities they possess.

Young people need opportunities to talk about their experiences in peer and dating relationships, as well as to understand the elements of abuse that can manifest. Jewish education initiatives that tackle the subjects of healthy and unhealthy relationships have gained more prominence in the last few years: Sacred Choices (URJ); Strong Girls and When Push Comes to Shove (JWI); It's No Longer Love (Tzelem, a project of Yeshiva University's Center for the Jewish Future's: Life Values and Intimacy Education); Love Shouldn't Hurt (Shalom Bayit); and Yad B'Yad (Faith Trust Institute). Each of these curricula emphasizes the core idea that young people can be educated within formal Jewish education to choose relationships of partnership.

Jewish educators can play a key role in extending learning beyond the subjects that traditionally taught to further Jewish literacy; Hebrew language study, exploration of ritual practice, social-action projects and b'nei mitzvah prep can coexist alongside an effort to help young people gain a language for talking about the qualities of healthy relationships. By mindfully drawing upon the resources that exist and integrating entry points for these difficult discussions, we send the explicit message to adolescents that Judaism is connected to learners' daily lives. We emphasize that Jewish education values discussion of the challenges that our students face, and we recognize that interpersonal growth is the counterpart to spiritual development.

Torah at the Center

Gender Issues—For Teens, From Teens

By Subie Banaszynski, Regional Director of Youth and Informal Education, Union for Reform Judaism Midwest Council, and Director of Program, North American Federation of Temple Youth

I sat in the back of the classroom, feeling torn between being the educator and the mother. There were 40 ninth graders, sitting still, totally captivated by our guest speaker. I was astonished by two things: The kids were absorbed in the moment, and my son was the one leading the discussion.

My third son is a remarkable young man (every Jewish mother's perspective!). He is an excellent student, an incredible ballet dancer, an accomplished musician and a leader in his own version of tikkun olam. He is also gay. His experience "coming out" was fairly comfortable—he was brought up in a liberal Jewish home where diversity is valued and differences are appreciated. My husband and I had been waiting for him to realize he was gay. When he finally mouthed the words "I'm gay" to all of us, we embraced his self-realization with relief and pride. Britt was 13 years old.

As a parent, it is difficult to watch your child face the challenges of gender identification. While we and he were comfortable with his orientation, his whole world was not quite as accepting. His oldest brother was somewhat dismissive, muttering "duh" to the announcement, while his other brother asked, "Why would you choose that?" Britt became very conscious of his clothing style—at first not wanting to look "too gay" or "too straight." He had to navigate the gender stereotypes around him to see where he fit in. He had to straddle the line between being a young man in baseball-loving, mid-America and an effeminate gay teen. He questioned whether his Judaism could still accept him as a "good" Jew.

In the classroom that day, three years after coming out, Britt was leading a discussion of what it is like to be Jewish and gay and how gender influences Judaism. The students were comfortable enough to express themselves, sometimes with brutally frank questions. For example, they asked:

- What is it like for you, at a NFTY event, when youth are only housed in same-sex homes?
- When you are at camp and the boys all shower together, how does that make you feel?
- What do you do if a girl flirts with you?
- Why do you like shopping so much?
- Does being a ballet dancer make you feel like a girl?
- Do you ever feel like a girl trapped in a boy's body?
- I heard that if "a man lies with a man" then you can't be Jewish.

Britt was able to answer these questions as a person who has real-life experience balancing gender issues in today's society.

As an educator, I was amazed by the honest dialogue that took place. I realized the importance of this conversation, not only because these are current teen issues but also because it was truly a youth-led, youth-participation conversation. I remained silent. History has taught me that when I, as an adult, presented the same teen-oriented information, the ensuing discussion was different. If it is a youth issue, then youth leaders must play a central role.

Another lesson I learned after this program was the lasting effects of this conversation. Months later, some of the students were exploring their own gender identities regardless of sexual orientation and shared that with me. Two parents called and asked if I would hold a similar class for adults because they wanted to be a part of the experience.

Dialogue about gender issues belongs in Jewish education. We are helping students to identify themselves as Jews, no matter what their differences. But this, and many other youth conversations, must involve and be directed by youth. How many times have we, a group of middle-aged educators, sat around and talked about the issues that kids face today? If the conversation is about youth, we must make sure that their voice is heard.

Putting Gender on the Agenda for Supervisors of Jewish Youth Professionals

By Beth Cooper Benjamin, Ed.D., Senior Associate, Ma'yan: The Jewish Women's Project, JCC in Manhattan, New York

At the JCC in Manhattan, where I work, it's sometimes hard to tell apart the staff who work with our teens and the teens themselves. Youth professionals who work directly with adolescents—including camp counselors, youth-group advisors and student-life directors, as well as formal educators—often enter this work as freshly minted adults. They bring a level of energy, passion and creativity that can put their more senior colleagues to shame. Because of their youth, they claim what anthropologists call "insider status," which garners them trust and legitimacy as leaders. However, the very qualities that make young professionals so desirable in work with youth also create particular challenges. And, while this issue isn't exclusive to male or female staff, we know that teens look to these teachers and leaders as role models. Whether they are aware of it or not, youth professionals constantly convey messages about gender through their work.

Gender is a key category through which teens discern the rules that govern their social worlds. Throughout the teen years, notions of masculinity and femininity feature prominently in the identities middle- and late-adolescents try out (the football jock, the mean girl, the tomboy). Bestselling books like William Pollack's Real Boys and Rachel Simmons' Odd Girl Out report that teens—boys and girls alike—describe feeling tremendous pressure to conform to others' rules about gender. Knowledge of these rules comes to teens from many sources: from the real people in their lives (especially those with whom they identify and whom they admire, such as young, dynamic Jewish teachers and advisors) and, just as powerfully, from the popular culture.

Whether it's in the form of Bratz dolls, Disney Princesses or images of men in hip-hop gear, gendered messages in the popular culture are a hot topic among concerned adults. Thinking about the role of Jewish youth professionals in the lives of teens, it is crucial to remember that teens are not the only ones being influenced by mainstream pop culture. Often, youth professionals are watching the very same TV shows, using the same social-networking websites, and tracking the same ads, fads and celebrity scandals. With guidance and support from supervisors, youth professionals can learn to use pop culture "moments" (that is, teens' offhand comments, song lyrics, or excerpts from films and TV shows) as resources for teaching and pointing out the values and messages embedded in the media they consume.

As Ma'yan works to address the needs of girls in the Jewish community, we've learned that cultivating this capacity in youth professionals can serve two ends at once: improving the skills of youth-serving staff and strengthening the effect of programming, regardless of its specific content. One powerful strategy is for supervisors to model attention to gendered language and other cultural messages. This is not the same thing as policing, which consists of either shaming or simply attempting to avoid instances of gender bias. Instead, modeling means actively engaging these issues when they arise.

Riding in an elevator, a senior staff member once shared with me her concern that kvelling over a little girl's spangled tutu had been a mistake, that she'd both reinforced the narrow demands of femininity and implied to the girl's plainly dressed friend that she was less worthy of attention. Sharing her doubt and confusion about how to handle gender in that moment was an act of generosity, a teachable moment well-met. Just as that incident sharpened my ear and challenged my thinking, supervisors' willingness to narrate such moments helps their colleagues to think through similar dilemmas for themselves.

Seizing these opportunities isn't always easy, even for the most experienced among us. Reflecting on these moments threatens to expose the ways we all have compromised our principles around gender. Attempting to ignore double-standards and gendered mixed messages or to resolve them neatly perpetuates the fantasy that they are individual problems, when in fact they are cultural and structural problems that require collective solutions. Sharing our concerns, our intentions and even our fumbles reminds us that we are allies in a shared struggle for tikkun olam.

Torah at the Center

The New Jew

By Rabbi Marc J. Rosenstein, Ph.D., Foundation Director, Makom ba-Galil, Moshav Shorashim, Israel

...Taking each others' pictures with the distinguished
dead at Rachel's tomb
And Herzl's tomb and Ammunition Hill,
Weeping for the beauty of the heroism of our boys
And lusting for the toughness of our girls...

—Yehudah Amichai, "Tourists"

Zionism was more than simply a movement to obtain land and statehood. It was a revolution against the Diaspora—and against the perceived nature of Jewish identity in the Diaspora. The Zionists sought to create a New Jew, who would be strong, brave, and natural, freed of the neuroses and fears of ghetto life. This direction in Zionism can be seen as reflecting a trend in European thought of the late 19th and early 20th centuries—a feeling that European society was decadent and weak, cut off from its roots in blood and soil. Young intellectuals in Europe envisioned a New Man.

In our case, the New Jew was expected to be some kind of a new hybrid, bringing together the virtues of rootedness in the soil; suntanned, muscular good health; simple morality and a sense of honor; courage and military prowess; a proclivity for wholesome, honest, physical labor; commitment to his community and his people; and some kind of Jewish cultural distinctiveness. While there was a certain amount of rhetoric from the early 20th century about equality between the genders, which was certainly in keeping with socialist ideals, a lot more imagination and interest was focused on the New Jew than on the New Jewess. And the memoirs of the early pioneer women are full of frustration and even bitterness at their relegation to the laundry, the kitchen and the nursery. I think that while there was a theoretical commitment to gender equality and the liberation of women from their traditional roles and status, the image of the New Jew was definitely a masculine, "macho" one. Those cute girl soldiers, it turns out, are mostly secretaries, teachers and social workers in the army; and those chalutzot (pioneer women) spent an inordinate amount of time in the kitchen. American Jews cling to the image of Golda Meir as a nice Jewish grandma. But from closer up, it looks like she achieved her success in politics here by "acting like a man" among the men who built and ruled the country.

Israel, as it developed, incorporated a number of cultural influences that perpetuated traditional gender roles: perhaps first of all, the emphasis on defense, on the necessity of military thinking, skills and prowess, on the culture of the army, generated a definition of the ideal Israeli male as "fighter" (a word transliterated into Hebrew phonetically to refer to a military "type"). Even six decades into statehood, the sense that we are under siege continues to be a part of our collective consciousness, and the combination of universal conscription and years of reserve duty (for men) to some extent convert the whole country into a barracks, dominated by buddies, comrades in arms, who enjoy an earthy, backslapping sense of esprit de corps that shows up in just about every social setting and that is unquestionably masculine/macho in tone. Another not-insignificant factor is the predominance in Israel of populations that represent premodern cultural backgrounds, societies that were and are extremely patriarchal—for example, Jews and Arabs from the Middle East, Ethiopian Jews and Jews from ultra-Orthodox communities. These cultures are very much alive and present all around us, and even those who have grown away from their roots often find it hard to break away from deeply ingrained values and habits.

Meanwhile, of course, Israel is not immune to the cultural currents that flow around the globe. The small, close-knit society of the pre-state yishuv has grown into a modern state, diverse, divided, integrated into the world economically and culturally. Even in the most traditional communities, like the Arab villages, the increasing availability of local options for higher and vocational education means that young women are not consigned to working in local sewing shops until their marriage at twenty-one, but can aspire to a more satisfying intellectual and professional life path. And so, willy-nilly, men too have to readjust their expectations and their roles. These shifts often cause a great deal of personal suffering, and there are reversals and backlash. But the wheels of change seem unlikely to stop turning.

And while it is still true that Israel feels that if it does not remain the alpha male in the neighborhood it could

disappear—and that feeling trickles down to an emphasis on traditional masculine virtues and male dominance throughout society—still, nothing is as simple as it used to be: Israel's entry in the Eurovision song contest in 1998 was transsexual pop diva Dana International. And in 2002 a popular film, Yossi and Jagger, dealt with a homosexual love story set in a combat unit in the army. Periodically the media cry gevalt over statistics that seem to indicate a decline in interest by high school seniors in combat units—and increased numbers of kids who find ways to opt out of army service altogether. The courts have found in favor of men who sued over prospective employers' use of their army record as a criterion for hiring. And now it seems that the traditional path from military to political leadership exemplified by people like Yitzchak Rabin and Ariel Sharon is no longer taken for granted; both our prime minister and our defense minister rose to their positions through civilian channels and are not military heroes or even veterans of elite units. It is interesting that while the army remains perhaps the most sacred of Israel's sacred cows, its centrality as a unifying and leveling force, its role as melting pot and identity builder have diminished over the past several decades. There are probably at least several reasons for this shift: the disillusionment over the Yom Kippur war; the feeling of failed leadership in the wake of the first and second Lebanon wars; globalization and the rise of individualism and materialism at the expense of the willingness to sacrifice for the nation; the realization that not all existential threats can be solved by force... These can be seen as disturbing trends, signs of disintegration—or as indications of the maturation and "normalization" of Israeli society. In any case, the decline in the centrality of the army experience in life and culture has helped open up the definition and expectations of male identity.

I remember, as a high school exchange student in Israel over 40 years ago, being very much impressed and moved by the heroic sabra image: the ideal of the relaxed, straightforward, brave, idealistic young men. This seemed to me the height of authenticity, just as it had to Jews seeking to shed the stereotype of the "Old Jew" 60 years earlier. Later, coming on aliyah in my mid-forties, I experienced certain pangs of guilt and disappointment that I had not paid my dues, had missed out on the formative experience of the army. And thus, it was with great ambivalence that I waved goodbye to each of my children at the induction center as they went off to serve in combat units: torn between feeling proud, feeling "really Israeli," and feeling terribly anxious—but beyond that, wondering if, at the bottom line, the Zionist dream was really to build a society in which patriotic pride at seeing our children put on uniforms would be such a central aspect of the culture. Is the solidarity of the tank crew really superior to that of the chevruta study partners in the yeshiva? How did we get to the idealization of strong young men instead of wise old ones? Are we products of "the security situation"—or are we, by playing out these conceptions of heroism and strength, actually helping to create that very situation? If we are so powerful, then why are we powerless to change the reality in which we live?

We will, I believe, continue to mature as a society. As the culture evolves, I believe we'll reach a time when we'll look back with a bemused smile at the masculine ethos that characterized our first sixty years. I look forward to a renewal of our connection with the traditional understanding that redemption comes "not by might, and not by power, but by spirit" (Zecharia 4:6).

This article is based on Galilee Diary entries for January 21 and 28, 2007 (found at ***urj.org/educate/galilee/entries/***). A longer version will appear in The Still Small Voice, edited by Michael Holzman (URJ Press, 2007).

Torah at the Center

Teach Girls and Boys Diligently and Differently

By Adie Goldberg, MSW, Religious Education Director, Temple Beth Shalom, Spokane, WA, and Jewish Studies Coordinator, the Gurian Institute; and Michael Gurian, author of *Boys and Girls Learn Differently!*

When a Jewish child during the Middle Ages reached the age of 5 or 6 the commencement of school was traditionally a cause for great celebration. Parents bought the child new clothing, and the father wrapped his child in his tallit and presented him to the head of school. There he was given a slate, upon which the letters of the alef-bet were written in honey to be licked off and savored in the hope that teaching and the words of Torah always would be sweet.

What a mandate for us as Jewish educators! How do we keep learning sweet for students in both our day and supplemental schools? We face the same challenges as teachers in secular schools: motivation and classroom management; male students lagging behind in Hebrew language studies; female b'not mitzvah students reluctant to demonstrate their proficiency over male peers; mothers of boys meeting with female teachers in order to address their sons' outbursts after school or during Sunday school programs.

A study in 2000 found that boys lag 1.5 years behind their female classmates in both reading and writing. (NCES 2000) Boys represent of students diagnosed with learning disabilities, and most principals and education directors will concur that 90 percent of their discipline referrals are boys. Bava Batra 21a states that a child who is difficult should not be removed from school but should remain with the other students. Yet, despite our efforts, our boys are losing ground. We must find strategies that continue to address the gains made by our daughters while designing classrooms suited for our sons' learning as well. The new brain sciences have moved fast beyond gender stereotypes to study how boys and girls learn differently and provide practical innovations and strategies.

Men and women are different. We now know of more than 100 structural differences between the male and female brain. Science has found:

- The connecting bundle of tissues that connect the two hemispheres of the brain are larger in a girl, on average, than in a boy.
- There are more connections in the temporal lobe in the female brain, which contribute to better listening skills and more detailed memory, especially for sensorial and emotional subtleties.
- The hippocampus (a memory-storage area of the brain) is larger in girls than it is in boys, contributing to the "multitasking" memory so many girls have—the ability to remember lots of things about lots of different areas of focus and to process internally all the areas of memory.
- The female prefrontal cortex is more active than a boy's, and it develops earlier, which helps girls to be less impulsive physically. It also contributes to their general trend of being better behaved. (Moir and Jessel, 1989; Rich, 2000)

On the other hand:

- Boys' brains have more area devoted to spatial-graphic processing. One result: They often want to move things through physical space, including their own bodies, and they often want to look at more pictures and less words.
- With fewer connections between hemispheres, boys often compartmentalize learning. As a result, boys often have more difficulty than girls in multitasking, and transitioning from lesson to lesson.
- The male brain moves less serotonin and oxytocin (calming chemicals) through the frontal cortex than does the female brain; thus, boys are inclined to be more impulsive than their female counterparts. (Moir and Jessel)

Our task as Jewish educators is intimidating. The charge is great. The traditional Jewish understandings of the different roles and affinities of men and women now are being proven by science. Our sons and daughters are different. Their brains are different; they process information differently; they learn differently. Let us use modern research and the Torah to guide us.

For more strategies and information on how to teach boys and girls differently, visit www.gurianinstitute.com.

Dear Educator

Our response comes from Susan Kittner Huntting, a Jewish education consultant working directly with congregations, writing for the Experiment in Congregational Education and teaching at Temple Sinai in Sarasota, Fla.

I am thinking about adding the Sacred Choices curriculum to our confirmation program. What kind of person would be the best teacher?

The URJ's Sacred Choices curriculum presents opportunities for important conversations that may not otherwise happen for students in the middle and high school grades. These are the years when our students confront so many new and tricky personal situations and rarely get the guidance they need. Recognizing that every congregation and community has different resources, you will have to find the best teacher/facilitator who is available. Here are some broad recommendations based on my experience piloting the Sacred Choices High School Module last year in my ninth grade religious school class:

• Don't assume your existing teachers—or even your rabbi—are appropriately skilled or comfortable facilitating Sacred Choices discussions. It is one thing to facilitate a discussion with teenagers about healthy relationships, messages about sexuality in the media and Jewish values. It is far more intimate to discuss with them their own sexuality and sexual behavior. A Sacred Choices teacher needs to be able to do both and connect the two. Someone with extensive experience relating well to adolescents who may have related professional credentials and who will engender trust in the students is the teacher you want. If you do not already have on faculty the right person who fits this profile, you certainly can bring in a guest facilitator for these sessions, as long as she or he understands the rationale behind the curriculum and what your particular goals are for incorporating these sessions into your program.

• Keep it real. Teenagers have finely tuned "credibility" monitors. They know the difference between a teacher who genuinely cares about them as people and a teacher who is simply doing a job. They also can tell when a teacher is comfortable in his or her own skin, as well as with the material, and when a teacher is out of his or her comfort zone. They can be highly critical if a teacher unknowingly makes dated references to what teenagers do today or if other comments do not ring true. Your teacher needs to be someone who knows and loves teenagers, can relate to them without losing an adult perspective and who genuinely is comfortable talking with kids, answering their questions and guiding them as they explore their sense of self, their sexuality and sexual behavior choices.

• Be sure you and your facilitator know your students' world. Choosing which lessons to use and deciding if they need any modifications should be determined by knowledge of your students and the world in which they live. Generally speaking, ninth and 12th graders run in different circles and are exposed to different social situations. Similarly, even 10th graders in one community or one particular school can be more sophisticated (or jaded or sexually active) than 10th graders in a different kind of community. Sacred Choices includes important conversations for all adolescents, but the presumptions you make about who your students are, what their issues are and the experiences they already have faced should factor into what material you cover and how you cover it.

• You need a teacher for your students and a teacher for your parents—and they may not be the same teacher. The Sacred Choices curriculum includes student, parent and family lessons. Though you can "pick and choose" which lessons to implement, including parents in the sessions will give them the skills to continue the students' classroom discussions at home. However, we all know teachers who have a great rapport with kids but who stumble when talking with parents. If you have someone like this working with students, you can bring in someone who is good working with adults in a family lesson because you will need two facilitators anyway. For parent lessons, you also can use a facilitator other than your classroom teacher, but it would be helpful for the teacher to attend those sessions or confer with the parent facilitator afterwards. By knowing the parents' questions and concerns, your classroom teacher can serve as a bridge between how the parents are thinking and how their children are thinking (without naming names, of course). Even if your teacher is not going to be working directly with parents, she or he is an important link in creating the opportunities for these Sacred Choices conversations to continue at home.

Torah at the Center

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