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Brotherhood Engages Teen Boys

UJA Federation of New York

After Bar Mitzvahs, too many teenage boys go away from Judaism, many in the New York Jewish community say. The Brotherhood program, supported by a grant from UJA-Federation of New York, is working to bring them back.



The Brotherhood program, run by Moving Traditions, engages teen boys by exploring Jewish values. The eight sessions connects Jewish themes to everyday life, exploring topics such as violence, finance, and college. The program is also a time for the boys to relax and talk with friends.

“It’s providing them a chance to discuss their faith. They let down their guard a little and share the struggles of being a high school boy,” says Andrew Paull, youth coordinator at Larchmont Temple, one of seven metropolitan New York sites with a total of 170 participants.

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Op-Ed: Ultimate Frisbee and the next generation of Jewish men

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Rabbi Daniel S. Brenner
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NEW YORK (JTA) -- If you happened to be sunbathing on Central Park’s Great Lawn last week, you may have caught one of the most highlight reel-worthy sporting events to take place in Manhattan since Connors and McEnroe were in the U.S. Open Final.

You would have seen men from across America competing in an Ultimate Frisbee spectacle that featured jaw-dropping catches, somersaulting dives and stunning leaps. Guys were taunting one another one moment and executing end-zone runs the next. And after the game ended and the usual high-fiving commenced, you may have wondered about the unusual display of sportsmanship as the opposing teams sat together in the grass to talk about competition, aggression and teamwork, and what they all have to do with being a man.



Who were those men in Central Park?

As part of the inaugural national launch of Moving Traditions’ program for teen boys, *Shevet Achim: The Brotherhood*, **25 men gathered for a training seminar in New York. In the mix were professional Jewish educators (rabbis and rabbinical students, teachers, directors of teen programs and summer camps) and men that work in the wider world (two lawyers, a pediatrician, a sommelier, a yoga instructor, a film editor and a sportswriter) who are willing to serve as mentors for local Jewish teens.**

The point of the gathering was to ask the question: **Given the high post-bar mitzvah dropoff rates for guys, how can the Jewish community do a better job of reaching out to teen boys?**

Many of the future mentors gathered in New York for the training gave firsthand accounts of the depth of their community’s problems reaching guys: Parents who tell their sons “just do your bar mitzvah and I promise you’ll never have to go to synagogue ever again”; teen guys whose only form of connection is participating on the youth group’s ski trip or amusement park trip (and quickly zoning out if there is any introduction of Jewish content); and synagogue-based social action events that go into panic mode when they realize that they have 20 girls enlisted and not one guy. **The mentors reported that many teen boys find Jewish life “nice,” boring, politically correct, predictable, conventional and, in a word, irrelevant.**

But these failures and apparent gender imbalances are somewhat superficial when compared to a deeper problem in the Jewish world that a few people are finally waking up to -- **the simple fact that educators and volunteers have not been trained to address the core issues that challenge, confuse and at times endanger teen boys.**

This is not to say that all boys face these challenges in a particular way or that girls do not have similar challenges, but that the vast majority of teen boys are wrestling internally **with what it means to be a man in a culture that sends them mixed messages. Should a man be loyal or defiant? Sensitive or tough?**

Should he show off his intelligence or keep it hidden? Should he flaunt his money or keep people guessing? Should he strive to have many friends or a few good ones? Should he work his abdominal muscles into a six-pack to show off at the beach or protect his modesty? Should he text his sexual exploits to his buddies or keep quiet and risk being seen as a prude?

From graphic video games to aggressive pornography, raunchy politicians to swaggering athletes, guys are seeing plenty of men whose motto is to have whatever they want when they want it -- and to take it by force, if necessary.

If Jewish communities aren't seriously engaged with the question of what it is to be a man in light of these messages, and posing alternative paths that can guide young men in balancing the desire for power and attention with a desire for connection and purpose, then they are not going to be relevant to most teen males.

Dr. Richard Stern, the clinical psychologist who helped design and execute the training, spoke in clear terms about male socialization.

"Teen boys are often inadvertently pushed into being emotionally stifled and 'supposedly' independent -- but they are far from being independent," he said. "The unconditional love that they once felt from parents or from peers has often been displaced by pressures to succeed academically or to be cool. Even guys who have many friends feel like they have no one to talk to."

So how might the Jewish community provide space where guys can really speak to one another?

Our goal is to train mentors to use play, critical thinking and storytelling to engage teen boys in the question of what it means to be a mensch. We see this effort as an inherently Jewish activity, focusing on the ongoing character development and values education that we have traditionally done on a weekly basis through the cyclical study of Pirkei Avot.

During the training, we delved **into Maimonides' ideas about extreme personalities and how these energies are balanced through self-awareness and discipline.** We shared Chasidic teachings on maturity, and we traced the last **3,500 years of Jewish men, unearthing multiple models of strength, kindness and courage.**

After the Frisbee game, a few of the mentors noted how they had pushed themselves physically on the field. One said it was the first time he had been in a public group with men who were wearing yarmulkes. Another said it was the first time he had played group sports with guys since he was a boy. Someone else remarked on how we had all paused when a player had fallen. And as if on cue, one man in the closing circle simply repeated the final score, savoring the victory, lovingly rubbing it into the faces of the losing squad.

After Rosh HaShanah, these men will begin to meet with teens in their communities and develop ongoing forums where teen boys can meet, hang out, play games and talk about what it means to be a man. The programs will take place in six metropolitan areas, with plans to expand to additional cities in the coming year.

Will it catch on? Well, let's say that the Frisbee is still floating. But at least we have recognized that there are hundreds of thousands of guys sitting on the sidelines of Jewish life and we have a few coaches who are ready and eager to pull them off the bench.

(Rabbi Daniel S. Brenner is the Director of Initiatives for Boys and Men at Moving Traditions.)

Boys to men: A Thanksgiving lesson via Esau

By Rabbi Daniel S Brenner

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On Thanksgiving Day, my teen sons and thousands of other Jewish boys across the country will be eating large helpings of turkey and watching modern-day gladiators (a.k.a. the Dallas Cowboys) fight for field position beneath the world's largest Jumbotron. They'll see their heroes cheered on by a giddy, barely-clad group of women called the Cowgirls and interrupted by Lite Beer commercials about "manning up."

Some of the messages they will receive, both subtle and not-so-subtle, will be: **crush your opponent, rub it in his face, don't act like a girl, eat large portions of meat, drive fast cars, flaunt your money, have a clean shave, ridicule your friends -- and if you do all these things, then hot women will entertain you.**

At half-time, there may well be an update on the atrocities that occurred at Penn State, where a culture that values loyalty and power and "winning above all" contributed to the systematic failure to report a heinous crime against a child.

After they've taken in this barrage of messages, on Saturday my sons will sit in synagogue listening to the chanting of the story of Jacob and Esau.

With Thanksgiving football and Parshat Toldot coinciding this year, there is probably no better time to be **talking about the messages our sons are receiving about being men. Does the Jewish tradition teach them anything to help them to navigate or counter these messages? Will they be like the Penn State students who overturned a news van to protest Paterno's firing, or will they be like the students who organized a vigil for the victims?**

This week's Torah portion begins with Isaac and Rebecca welcoming their twin sons into the world - and presenting us with two competing male energies.

Esau, the first-born hunter, is described by our rabbinic sages as the prototype of a Roman soldier. Rashi goes so far as to say that the bloodthirsty Esau "hunts women from underneath their husbands." He is, in other words, a rapist.

Jacob, on the other hand, desires to study, spends a great deal of time indoors, and listens to his mother. For Rashi and the other commentators of the medieval period, to be a Jewish man meant to be the anti-thesis of the gladiator.

In the last century, Zionists, feminists, and gender theorists debated whether Jacob should be regarded as the epitome of Jewish manhood. After waves of pogroms in the Ukraine, Zionists like Max Nordau proposed a new model of "muscle Jews" and pioneers who would leave the study halls of Eastern Europe for farmland in Palestine. Feminists of the 1960s objected when modern day Jacobs would go off to study or work while women were left with household chores, child-rearing, and occasional words praising their valor.

In the 1990s, gender theorists like Daniel Boyarin tried to reclaim the fading ideal of the gentle, chubby, Jewish "mama's boy" from the growing worship of machismo and militarism, the so-called "tough Jews."

In working on the new teen boys program with Moving Traditions for the past year, I have found value in all of these critiques and reclamations of Jacob as the original mensch. But I've also felt that unless we begin to understand Esau, we will not be able to adequately guide our sons in being men.

Esau is dutiful to his father. When his father is hungry, Esau rushes off to the hunt. In fact, Esau is seen as the extreme example in Torah of loyalty. The Zohar relates that "no one ever loved his father as much as Esau loved his father."

But Esau represents something other than extreme filial loyalty.

A collection of commentaries, Midrash Rabba, relates that one of Abraham's old enemies, **Nimrod, is trying to hunt Esau down. That's why Esau is often away on hunting expeditions. As a teenager, Esau is in a constant state of fear and begins to see the entire world as a one big competition of "kill or be killed." The commentary helps us understand why Esau sells his birthright, gives up on his future, and goes off in the world to take all that he can from others.**

When Jacob follows his mother's advice and tricks Isaac into giving him the first-born blessing, Esau cries. In his heart, he wants to kill his brother. He feels that his loyalty was for nothing, and that he is destined for failure. It is no wonder that the mystic, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, taught that "redemption only comes when Esau's tears are consoled."

Is there some Jewish wisdom from this story that might help my teenage boys think differently about what it means to be men?

Consoling Esau's tears means learning to understand the damage that comes with a male culture that places cut-throat competition and extreme loyalty above all else. While loyalty and competition are positive forces, when they go unchecked, as they did at Penn State, deceit and cover-ups thrive in the name of protecting a winning persona. Later in Genesis, as he watches his own sons mature, Jacob learns that loyalty and competition must be balanced with a critique of power and the ability to build alliances.

Over time, Esau decides that it is better to reconcile with his brother than to hunt him down. As the competition ends, and the two brothers meet face to face, the hairy hunter falls on his brother's shoulder and begins to weep.

In this moment of maturity and healing, we learn that men are capable of more than loyalty, competition, and dominance. Could there be a better message for Thanksgiving weekend?