KEEPING TRACK OF TEENS

Post-B’nai Mitzvah programs and ideas for keeping teens connected to congregations

By Cantor Carol Chesler

**REALITY:**

Of all the main life cycle events in Judaism, becoming a Bar/Bat Mitzvah is the only one that focuses on the individual when that individual is in full awareness of being the center of attention for the day. The (3) B’s – Baby-naming, Bris, and Burial – the person at the center of the event has no awareness of what’s going on. The big (M), or marriage, is not about the individual – it is about becoming a unit, a couple, about connecting to another individual and another family. The “B-M” or Bar/Bat Mitzvah, then is unique; it is truly the **B**ig **M**oment. At the ripe old age of 13, a young man or young woman is supposed to be able to sing in a foreign language before several hundred people (after some months of preparation); stay attentive, alert, and well-behaved for 3 hours in new/uncomfortable clothes and shoes; lead those several hundred people in prayer (with little or no previous experience), and be in complete control of all other emotions (nerves, fear, apprehension, giggles, fatigue, panic, jubilation, etc.) for several hours. When this highly emotional and exhausting experience concludes, what happens? These students will most likely disappear. The last goody bag is distributed at the end of the celebration, the hall cleaned up, presents collected, and the family goes home. If this was the youngest child’s Bar/Bat Mitzvah in the family, it is often a given that the connection to the congregation will lessen, and perhaps even be severed. Religious School education has concluded with the close of 7th grade, and the necessity of ongoing Jewish education is seen as unessential, uncompelling, and burdensome with so many other obligations in the high school years. If the family has no other younger children in religious school, what’s the point in staying connected to the shul? Unlike birth and marriage, Bar/Bat Mitzvah is the only life cycle event often seen as an end product – a culmination of Jewish education, and an end to formal connection and affiliation to a congregation. Why is that?

“We also have to remember that today we are competing with so much more than we used to.  Sports, Dance, Theater, Internet, etc.  It seems like a lot of people (parents more so than the students) are ‘burnt out’ of Synagogue after the B/M and wish to stay away for a while.  I've noted this more today than when I started at my other Synagogue in 2002 as (originally) their Education Director.  I don't think it is a fact of how do we ‘keep’ them but how do we ‘compete’ with everything else going on?  How do we make the Synagogue and Judaism seem more "exciting" and more "enticing" than all the other cool activities that are out there today for teens?  It is only going to get harder. “ **Cantor Steve Hevenstone**

I often referred to these students who literally disappear as, “I.N.S.T.A. Kids,” meaning, “I Never Saw Them Again. . .” According to one knowledgeable teenager, my son, Rafi (17, high school senior at Solomon Schechter of Long Island), teens will stay involved in Jewish life after Bar/Bat Mitzvah for 2 reasons: A) Their parents make them or, B) The congregation offers compelling and engaging programs solely geared to teen interest and involvement, like USY; furthermore, the clergy and lay leaders are sincerely interested in and profoundly connected to the teens in the shul. The single most compelling reason for teens to stay involved is an opportunity to see and **be with their friends** – everything else is secondary, even social action programming, going to Israel, or the chance to make a few dollars. If the congregation offers teens a chance to stay connected with their friends after Bar Mitzvah, something has gone right.

The next goal, after getting the teens back into shul, is creating programs and opportunities that keep them Jewishly connected, including elements of education, social conscience building, and community building as well. How do we do all of that, and not lose the teens? Ideally, the seeds are planted well before the Bar/Bat Mitzvah takes place; the connection to the congregation is so deeply felt, and the student’s involvement in synagogue life is already so nurtured, developed, and cultivated that continued participation is a given, essential, not even a question. Accordingly, the work begins well before the age of 13. Moreover, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah is not regarded as an end to the Jewish experience or Jewish education, but a step along the way in an ever-evolving and growing connection to all things Jewish. Clergy and lay leaders cannot simply hope or expect that teens will want to stay connected to the shul after Bar/Bat Mitzvah. They have to work to make it happen, by personally interacting with students during their years in the religious school – not only knowing their names, but knowing them as individuals, and cultivating their skills and talents within the synagogue. The clergy has the opportunity to have a profound impact on students through personal connections and relationships. The interest the clergy shows in these students will have enormously positive residual effects down the road. Very often, unfortunately, clergy do not connect in profound and meaningful ways with students prior to Bar/Bat Mitzvah, and the opportunity to plant the seed is lost.

Congregations are finally coming to terms with the fact of this lost generation , from the ages of 13 to 18 -- and looking to change the trend, to make synagogue life more inclusive of teenagers. How will that decades-old pattern of post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah “Jewish education elimination” be broken?

**BRAINSTORM:**

**POSSIBLE NAMES FOR YOUR TEEN SCENE:**

1. Making Shul Cool
2. The Essence of Adolescence a t the ------ Jewish Center
3. The Youth Booth, “My-PAD,” or Teen Canteen (name for a shul teen lounge)
4. The Yehudi of Puberty (“Jew-berty”)
5. ----- (You fill it in!)

**TEN PROGRAM IDEAS:**

1. T.R.O.P. – **T**orah **R**eaders [are] **O**utstanding **P**eople (Torah readers academy)
2. Madrichim, Mensches, and Mentors
3. Teen Tefilah services and B/M anniversaries/celebrations (excuse to host a Kiddush)
4. Teens on the Boards and various committees
5. Teen Bulletin Columns
6. Class(es) for teens taught by clergy
7. Community theater productions
8. Purim Teen Megillah reading/Yom Tov Megillah reading
9. Ba’al Tefillah core – service leaders
10. Teen choir

Then there are, of course, Jewish summer camps and Jewish youth groups, like Kadima, USY, and other youth groups (BBYO, Young Judea, Habonim, Hazamir Youth Chorale, etc.) with lounge nights, social action events, weekend gatherings (kinnus, kallah, conventions, etc.), athletic programming, summer programs, trips to Eastern Europe, Israel, etc. The synagogue provides the space or location for some of these gatherings, but the program itself, the group itself is often an independent entity within the congregation.

1. **T.R.O.P.** – **T**ORAH **R**EADERS [ARE] **O**UTSTANDING **P**EOPLE: Developing a core of committed, knowledgeable teen Torah readers, who chant on a regular basis, on Shabbat, Chagim, High Holidays, in weekday Minyan, etc. Great Torah reading skills can begin to be developed well before Bar/Bat Mitzvah, starting in 6th grade when trop is first taught and small portions of the Torah are chanted. The opportunity to chant can happen not only in a religious school class shabbaton but also in Junior Congregation. The Torah reading skills are further developed during Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation, and the student chants a considerable amount of the portion, if not all of it. The student is put on the roster of Torah readers before the Bar/Bat Mitzvah, and given a couple of dates for reading Torah some time shortly following the Bar/Bat Mitzvah so the momentum is not lost.

A reward system is good to put in place – incentives to come back and read again (tickets to the movies, local events, concerts, or gift cards to book stores, CD’s of Jewish music, free Ben ‘n Jerry’s ice cream, etc.) are helpful. Also, recognition and appreciation of Torah readers are essential by congregation – in the bulletin, on a plaque in the lobby, or on the Shabbat flier given at the door of the sanctuary. Good administrative assistance is crucial to making this program work – it entails many phone calls, Xeroxing portions, recording portions (if necessary), reminder calls, and checking preparation of all readers well before the date. Any program involving teens requires considerable effort in the category of reminders.

1. **Madrichim, Mensches, and Mentors :** (A)Having teens participate as **madrichim** (counselors or assistants) in religious school, helping in class rooms or with learning disabled students, as tutors of students needing extra help, doing administrative tasks (like distributing fliers and advertising of upcoming shul events), selling snacks, organizing classroom materials for teachers, and running errands. (B) Giving teens opportunities to become **mensches** –doing social action activities in the shul (like staffing the synagogue soup kitchen or gathering used coats for the homeless) and helping them accumulate community service time hours – a win/win situation. (C) Pairing up a teen with a current Bar/Bat Mitzvah student who shares the same Parsha – a **mentor**/tutor program. The student benefits from working with someone not much older who had the same parsha on his/her Bar/Bat Mitzvah, and a friendship can happen between 2 teens that most likely would never have occurred. The older teen can be like a “big brother/big sister” figure, and give the Bar/Bat Mitzvah student someone to emulate.
2. **Teen Tefillah Services** **and B/M anniversaries/celebrations (excuse to host a Kiddush):**

Two possibilities: An independent service completely run/led by teens on a Shabbat in shul, outside of the main service, with its own Kiddush afterwards, or teens participating in the main service, leading it, running it, in front of the general community, with an all-inclusive Kiddush. Either way, teens continue to cultivate and master synagogue skills.

B/M anniversaries and celebrations occur when a teen is called back to chant a Haftarah or read from the Torah on the anniversary of his/her Bar/Bat Mitzvah, when the portion is identical to the one already known. The family sponsors a Kiddush afterwards to continue the celebration. This can only happen on a Shabbat when a Bar/Bat Mitzvah is not happening. If one is happening, then minimally, that teen could get an Aliyah to commemorate that anniversary.

1. **Teens on the Boards and various committees:** Qualified teens would be requested to participate on one of the Boards in the shul, or perhaps on the Ritual Committee, or an education committee, etc. The interests, concerns, and ideas of the youth population should be heard and addressed by the lay leadership.
2. **Teen Bulletin Columns:** Designated teens contribute a monthly article to shul bulletin focusing on teen involvement and activity in shul life.
3. **Class(es) for teens taught by Clergy:**  Rabbi or Cantor of shul teaches a course to teens on subject interesting to both (ex.: “Social Networking and the Talmud,” or “Texting to God,” or “Why should I marry a Jew?”), or create a music forum for jamming, learning about some kind of Jewish music together, or going to Jewish events as a group (theater, museum exhibitions, movies, concerts, etc.). Goal: opportunity for clergy and teens to have terrific bonding experience while engaging in a Jewish educational activity.
4. **Community theater productions:** All ages, teens included, participate in congregational theater production. Again, the goal is community bonding and strengthening, with teens included in the mix.
5. **Purim Teen Megillah reading/Yom Tov Megillah reading:** Organize a Megillah reading for Purim done solely by teens. Give each teen a jester hat or personalized grogger upon the conclusion of his/her reading as a gift for participating. Costumes are a must. Great administrative assistance is crucial in making the Megillah reading a success (like running TROP, or a Torah readers academy), with lots of phone calls, Xeroxing, recordings to burn, follow-up calls, and rehearsals to schedule.
6. **Ba’al Tefillah core – service leaders:** Training teens (well before Bar/Bat Mitzvah) to be Ba’alei Tefillah, or servicer leaders, in all areas [Shabbat, Yom Tov, Weekday, Rosh Chodesh, etc.]. Empowering the teens to be service leaders is a way of truly creating a participatory community. Again, the seeds are sown here well before Bar/Bat Mitzvah, with participation in Junior Congregation, religious school shabbatons, and actually leading parts of the service on the day of Bar/Bat Mitzvah.
7. **Teen choir :**  A place to make music, connect with friends, do concerts, fundraisers, participate in religious services, perform outside the shul, entertain local groups, visit hospitals and nursing facilities, and just have fun.

**11 – What will you add to the list? Please email it to me!**

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