

Initiating Teens into Activism

Jonathan Spira-Savett

WHAT WOULD INVITE a Jewish teenager into a dialogue about activism? How do those of us who work with youth help them find themselves — as citizens and spiritual personalities — through an exploration of Judaism, democracy, and American idealism?

My first full-time position in Jewish education was in a new high school whose mission statement spoke of developing citizens for both the Jewish and American communities. In a seminar on American history, society, and culture tailored to this mission, my colleague Leslie Bazer and I augmented the typical curriculum with lessons on freedom, justice, and success. We wanted to help our Jewish students studying America to become “connected critics,” in Michael Walzer’s phrase. We wanted them to identify with American ideals that echo Jewish ideals, and with figures who have held our society to those principles. The experience asked the students to take responsibility for and articulate a posture toward society and country, as they learned its core narrative and provoking texts.

To be sure, not all of the students consented to be provoked — but many did. One student began the year wondering what it would feel like to concentrate so intensely on America, since she had always felt so tightly bound to Israel and to traditional ideas of Judaism. But she let herself board that Puritan ship with John Winthrop and hear his sermon about community and covenant. She debated with Emerson about creation, Eden, and the individual. She passed up the *Panim el Panim* trip (unfortunately), but stayed back and watched *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* in our classroom — and that changed her life. She became an activist for tolerance across race and ethnicity in our school and then in college.

What our students experienced and revealed hint at important principles for youth educators in both formal and informal settings. We discovered that teens were excited to hash out the basic philosophical dilemmas of individual and community and the nature of a just society, from many angles and in many guises. After hearing *kehillah* as a school mantra, they finally had our permission to delve into the other side too. Not just concepts, but political speeches, Supreme Court decisions, and literature were important — complex

and textured voices to hear, debate, and try on for themselves. In the texts of America, they recognized familiar Jewish dilemmas of covenant, responsibility, and the *yetzer ra*, along with their own adolescent struggles about self and relationships. These other minds validated and enriched their own quest to articulate a place in the world.

I have found the same dynamic at work among youth participating in programs of service or civic engagement in many settings. As educators build such programs, we need to integrate *midrash* and *ma-aseh*, the processes of consciousness and action. Young people need ways to interpret their experiences, discomforts, and dilemmas. Connecting teens to “texts” and “traditions”— Jewish, American, Jewish-American — gives them some sophisticated and satisfying tools and increases the likelihood they can recognize an identity and a set of roots worth keeping and deepening as they become adult citizens. (It was crucial, too, to give space to “countertexts” — the articulate spokesmen for rugged individualism.)

I find myself using words like “initiation” and “apprenticeship” more and more these days. Rather than simply boil down and present concepts or ideology, we should present multiple voices in multiple forms to young people. As activist-educators, we shouldn’t hide — each of us embodies a stew of ideas, dilemmas, and influences. Our convictions and actions link us to a line of Jewish activists who have influenced us, along with the reasons that animated our role models. These are people our next generation needs to hear and know about. Many Jewish teens can discover these heroes in their own family histories where it’s not uncommon to find shopkeepers or labor organizers who today would be called “socially responsible.”

We have to be wary of creating teen programs composed only of service or *tzedakah* experiences linked to bits of Jewish texts, discussed only within the circle of participants. Rather, we need models suited to formal classrooms and informal experiences where the roots of Jewish social activism are visible, in some combination of words and people. If no roots show, none can take root in the next generation, and our commitments will not easily blossom again.

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