

## Keeping the Needs of Jewish Teen Girls on the Agenda

By Rabbi Ellen Flax

The new Jim Joseph Foundation report, "[Effective Strategies for Educating and Engaging Jewish Teens](#)," has the potential to focus greater attention on, as well as garner additional financial support for, programs in the Jewish community that teach and engage young people. As the report makes clear, only a small percentage of Jewish teens are currently enrolled in any type of activity offered by the Jewish community. It is obvious that we must create a wide range of programs--that are competently staffed, affordable, offered at times that jive with teens' busy schedules, and most important, are fun and enrich hearts, minds, bodies and souls--to engage this generation.

As program providers, federation planners, and funders ponder their next steps at the local and national level, it behooves us to consider if the specific needs of the female half of the Jewish adolescent population are--and will be--addressed. Although it is true that female teens in the non-Orthodox world are more likely than their male peers to be enrolled in many Jewish frameworks, our experience at the Hadassah Foundation, the only national funder specifically devoted to Jewish girls and young women ages 12--25, nonetheless suggests that far more work needs to be done in this area if we want to better serve the girls we already engage, never mind broaden the base of those whom we may serve in the future.

For more than 13 years, we have funded gender-sensitive programming for female Jewish teens that have focused on their positive development-- physically, emotionally, and spiritually. We have learned that teen girls need a "safe space" to discuss their changing bodies, their sexuality, healthy relationships, and their place as young women in the Jewish community. We have also learned that their leadership abilities need special nurturing.

At a [forum](#) the Hadassah Foundation sponsored in December about the ways the Jewish community can better serve this population group, we heard from experts in the field--including Deborah Meyer, the Executive Director of Moving Traditions (a long-time Hadassah Foundation grantee that was cited in the Jim Joseph report) and Eve Landau, the Founding Executive Director of Ma'yan--that many traditional youth programs in our community do not address the specific developmental needs of girls, nor adequately nurture their nascent leadership skills (e.g. teen girls in leadership roles do not always feel comfortable expressing their needs and opinions; further, it is not uncommon to find boys overrepresented in leadership positions even when there are far more female participants in a given program.)

As we consider how to implement the many powerful recommendations in the Jim Joseph Foundation report, it is imperative that we incorporate a gender lens to analyze our efforts. To wit, we should be asking ourselves to what extent existing and planned programming is/will be: addressing the specific developmental needs of female teens; adequately encouraging, developing, and mentoring female teen leadership; providing training to professional and volunteer staff in these areas; and incorporating evaluation metrics that measure these types of outcomes. We should study the gender enrollment patterns as well as our marketing plans to understand why girls--as well boys--elect to engage in, or not engage in, certain activities. We should also seriously consider the potential role that single-sex programming can play in the existing, or expanded, panoply of programs we can offer teens.

The Jim Joseph Foundation report concludes that community-based initiatives need to offer "a broad range of opportunities, some targeted to specific cohorts within the 13- to 18-year -old cohort" so as "attract, involve and be developmentally appropriate for this diverse and variegated target population." Our girls--fully half of our target population--deserve no less.

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