

It's All About Youth:

Building Intergenerational Community at Temple Sinai

For Yom Kippur Morning

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By Rabbi Stuart Weinberg Gershon

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Sometimes we clearly understand where our teenagers are coming from and sometimes our teenagers feel like an inscrutable mystery.

"There's no telling," writes journalist Tamar Lewin, "who a 12 year old will be at any given moment. The child who just seceded from all family connections, declaring complete independence – the "Get off my back, it's my life, and I'll manage it myself" speech – will turn around, stricken, and ask, "Aren't you going to make my sandwich?"

I remember giving a sermon in which I passionately took Abraham to task for his behavior in the story of the binding of Isaac. How could Abraham have been so willing to sacrifice his own son?

After the service, a woman came up to me. She said, "Rabbi, I very much enjoyed your sermon. But I want you to know that Abraham's behavior presents no real problem for me."

"But how could that be?" I said earnestly. She looked me in the eye and said, "Rabbi, I am the mother of three teenagers..." and then she just walked away!

Now all of us were teenagers once. Come on, admit it! You'd think we'd be able to understand what makes teenagers tick and empathize with what they're going through. Instead, adults sometimes get down about today's adolescents.

"Young people don't care about anyone or anything but themselves. "Can you believe who these young people consider to be role models?"

"Kids today follow a different value system than we did when we were kids."

But it is not teenagers who are difficult. It's the teenage years. "The teenage years," observes Rabbi Laurie Katz Braun, "are the most growth-filled, painful, exhilarating, impossible years of life."

The teenagers at Temple Sinai are wonderful. They are smart, compassionate, funny. They are talented, hardworking, and full of life. They are also a little lost at times and would really appreciate more of our adult time and attention.

Listen to the words of one teenager, a high school junior: "this is a plea for congregations to see inside our world. Why are we so often forgotten? We're faced with so much it's incredible.

"Peer pressure is very, very strong – even for kids like me who go to synagogue. Teens already have the tendency to rebel, just because that's the way we're growing –but society does its part too. I can't stress enough how much we deal with sex, alcohol, disrespect, apathy, and drugs.

"I feel the congregation seems to overlook it. I guess it's just easier that way. Teenagers are so confused. We don't know who we are or who we want to be. We want to see what else there is in life. We want to try and dare to do the things mom and dad always say no to.

"We're dying for discussion that will bring us together to talk about real issues – discussions that tackle the issues we want to talk about, we need to talk about, and should talk about...we have hurts and worries and things we don't know exactly how to deal with...to be honest with you, we want to know more about how god can really relate to us.

"I ask one thing. I beg of you. Please do not ignore us. Know what we deal with."

What are our teenagers dealing with?

Our teenagers have fears. As if gun violence, the aids pandemic, and global warming weren't enough, now they've got international terrorism to worry about.

Our teens feel under tremendous stress. They feel pressure from everywhere. There is peer pressure to fit in, to conform, to be popular. There is pressure they put on themselves to compete, get good grades, do better than their peers. But most of the stress they feel comes from parental pressure. You've got to keep up with everything. You can't fail at anything. You can't disappoint us. You've got to gain admission into an elite college. You've got to match our affluence and professional accomplishment-- a mixed blessing if ever there was one.

And the dangers of adolescence are growing exponentially. Our teenagers have immediate access to self-destructive forces, yet they feel immune to risky behavior. In

and around our community, its easy to get to drugs, alcohol, sex and cigarettes. Some parents keep guns in their homes. The internet gives young people access to all sorts of high-risk activities.

What do our teens need from us?

Our teens need us to communicate with them, to engage them in daily conversation. Patricia Hersch writes in a tribe apart: a journey into the heart of American adolescence, "the turbulence of adolescence today comes not so much from rebellion as from the loss of communication between adults and kids, and from the lack of a realistic, honest understanding of what the kid's world really looks like."

The problem, research shows, is not only that kids shut down and won't talk. That's only part of the story. The other part of the story is that some parents avoid serious talks with their teenagers and some parents disengage too early.

Why would parents avoid serious talks with their kids?

They are reluctant to own up to their own shortcomings. In the rise and fall of the American teenager Thomas Hine observes, "we want [our teens], "to embody virtues we only rarely practice. We want them to eschew habits we've never managed to break...the weaknesses we see in youth are our own and we know it." one consistent parental refrain that emerged from a survey conducted by the gallop organization was: "i know I haven't done well in this myself."

Why would some parents disengage from their children too soon?

Some parents just give in to their teens' stereotypical request to back off. They don't recognize, say adolescent experts, that teens would actually welcome the attention, despite all their protestations to "leave me alone." many parents let go of childrearing when their kids reach the mid-teens. Most experts think this is too early, especially for boys.

Some parents disengage because they feel their children just won't listen. But if we build the kind of relationship with our teens that matters to them, they will care what we think. If we provide them with real answers to the very real questions of their lives, they will listen (based on hersch).

What do our teenagers need from this congregation?

Our teens need Temple Sinai to become a truly "youth-friendly" congregation. A "youth friendly" congregation values young people, involves young people in leadership, worship, and community events, listens to young people and responds to young people's needs with staff, facilities, and money.

Providing for our Temple Sinai youth means something wholly different from simply increasing the number of programs and services. It means a fundamental change in the culture of this congregation:

It means that we equate "the congregation" not only with adults but with all the generations.

It means that every adult in this congregation, no matter your age or the age of your children, feel some sense of responsibility to care about the teenagers in our midst.

After Andrea Yates drowned all five of her children last summer, I saw this letter to the editor of time magazine: "it does take a whole village to raise a child. Then maybe someone would have noticed." those kids were failed not just by their family. They were failed by the entire community of which they were a part.

All teens need their parents. All teens need additional adults in their lives who will support and guide them, nurture and help them process the conflicting messages of daily life. They need mentors who will promote their intellectual, spiritual, and moral growth and to give them good values to guide them in wise decision-making. They need role models who will give them the interpersonal skills to build successful intimate relationships and enduring friendships.

The goal of our Temple Sinai youth program is to connect with every teenager in this congregation, to foster their personal and Jewish growth, and to engage them in the life and the mission of this faith community.

I need your help to build true intergenerational community at Temple Sinai:

I need your teens to be enrolled in Temple Sinai high school, to come to tasty events, to sing in the teen choir, to sing in the intergenerational choir.

I need you to volunteer to teach, to be a mentor, or to be a role model.

I need grandparents in this congregation to "adopt" a Temple Sinai teen. Grandparents are part of teens' traditional support system. Many of our teens do not have grandparents near by.

I need the college students, graduate students, and young professionals in this congregation to get involved. Because of your combination of both youthfulness and maturity, you can be especially important to our teens.

How do we begin?

"At the heart of the youth-friendly congregation," teaches Jonathan Cohen "is the commitment to building [nurturing] relationships between youth and their parents,

between teens and other teens, and between youth and other adults.

For "it is through relationships that young people feel support. It's through relationships that young people learn values and boundaries. It's through relationships that young people learn they have much to contribute to the world."

How can you help to nurture our Temple Sinai teens? Let me count the ways:

First, you can join our faculty and teach an elective course to our teens in Temple Sinai high school on Sunday mornings.

Second, you can join our mentors program and become a professional mentor to a teenager who has expressed interest in your profession.

Third, you can join our community service program and participate with our teens in their community service projects.

Fourth, you can join our youth committee chaired by Henry Bassman.

In addition, here are just a few more steps all of us can take.

Please greet and be pleasant to our teenagers whenever you meet them. If someone from Tasty, our high school youth group calls to speak to your teen, please thank them for calling and encourage your adolescent to take the call.

Please find opportunities to let our teenagers know you value and care about them.

In our efforts to provide a more comprehensive youth program, Temple Sinai now sponsors three youth groups, where we used to have only one. Every high school student in this congregation is automatically a member of Tasty, advised by Jana and Jeremy Sharp. There are no dues. Please encourage your high school teenager to check it out.

In addition, Temple Sinai now has Club 45, a youth group for 4th and 5th graders, advised by Mr. Jack Lorber and Club 67, a youth group for 6th and 7th graders, advised by Ms. Allison Barbag. Your child is automatically a member. There are no dues. Please encourage your kids to check them out.

Rabbi Braun observes, "teenagers are like the Israelites in the midst of crossing the Sea of Reeds. They're not sure what's on the other side, but they're willing to make a break for it. And it's our job to help them get to the other side safely."

I pray that young people who grow up at Temple Sinai will know they are loved and cared for and feel a vital and valued part of this congregation. I hope it is one of your prayers for the New Year as well.

Temple Sinai is a wonderful community. We all know this. The challenge for this New Year is for us to build true intergenerational community within this congregation.

I hope you will help because there are only two lasting bequests that we can ever give to our children and teenagers. One is roots and the other is wings.