

## Teens and Tikkun Olam

*Do we know how to capture the Jewish imagination of today's teens?*

WATCH OUT! A TIDAL WAVE OF JEWISH teens is coming—the children of the baby boomers. Over the next decade there will be some 20 to 30 percent more teens in our communal pool than ever before.

With creativity we can instill a strong sense of Jewish identity in the next generation of American Jews. The question is, do we know how to capture the imagination of today's Jewish teens?

One of the surest ways to engage Jewish teens is through social action projects, or what Jewish tradition calls *tikkun olam*. Combining the mandate to fix the world with a deeper appreciation for the Jewish texts (and values that inform that work) is our primary mission at The Washington Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values. Our experience with thousands of Jewish teens over the past eleven years has yielded five critical principles that should be part of any program to get Jewish teens to engage in *tikkun olam*.

### 1. INFORM

With all its access to information through media and the Internet, the world of most teens is incredibly small. Teenagers possess a deep well of idealism, but it is covered by a thick crust of self-centeredness. The trick is to break through that outer crust.

Brief encounters with knowledgeable experts in a variety of fields, some with opposing points of view, can do just that.

Moral outrage emerges

when teens learn about the growing disparity of wealth in this country where the wealthiest 1 percent earn 20 percent of the country's income and a single parent working full time at minimum wage still needs food stamps to feed her children. Or when teens become aware of our abuse of the ecosystem, and ways to engage in responsible activism to turn back ecological disasters, it suddenly strikes them as inappropriate to stay in their cocoons.

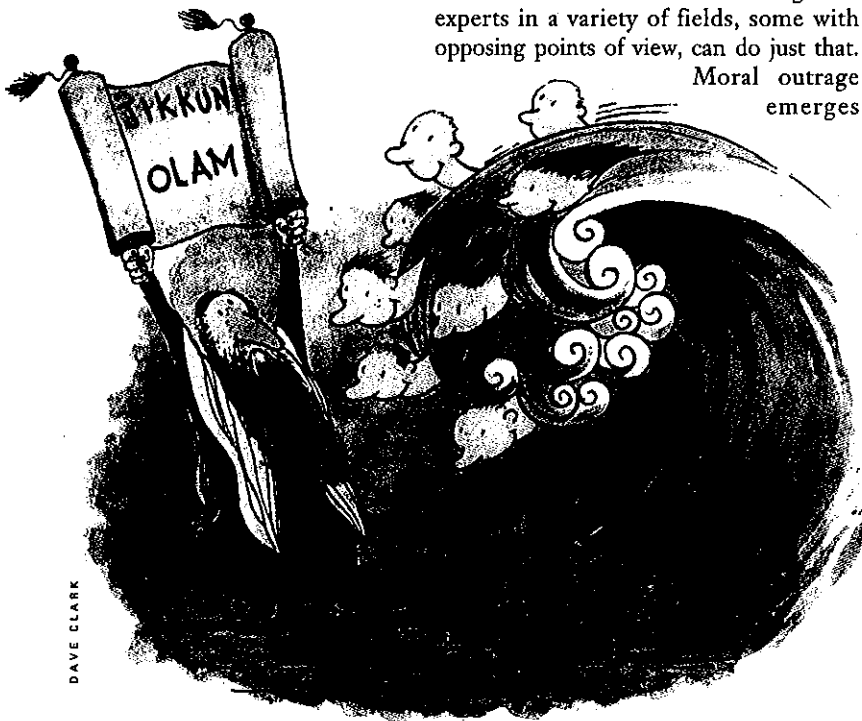
But moral outrage is not enough. In a society that is often in search of a value system to guide it, Jews are sitting on a gold mine—our own Jewish teachings. We should be telling our teens about Deuteronomy 8:12, which warns us against becoming blind to the poverty in our midst even as we grow wealthy. We should have them read Isaiah 5:8 and Micah 2:2 and ponder what those prophets said about the unrestrained accumulation of wealth while the majority lived in abject poverty.

Why not get our teens to discuss the implications that flow from the Jewish concept of *bal tashchit*, "you shall not destroy" (Deuteronomy 20:19)? The great sage Maimonides (*Yad Chuzakah, Melachim* chapter 6) expands on this concept and makes us appreciate how we must not misuse God's creation; rather, we should protect and defend it. This provides an entirely different value frame for teens, who are currently the most acquisitive of all human species because our consumer culture has successfully linked their sense of self-worth to their material possessions. Teaching them these Jewish values could help redirect their energies from consumption to *tikkun olam*.

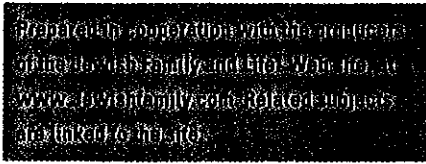
### 2. EMPOWER

Moral outrage is a good start, but it can't end there. Teens must learn about how social change comes about. Americans today have a cynicism about the political process, and teens share that bias. Yet despite the abuses that the media so loves to expose, politics is also the process through which one can change the world for the better.

Teens are often amazed to discover how open the political process is at the local, state, and national levels. *Carpe diem* (seize the day), said Robin Williams in the film *The Dead Poets Society*. It is a powerful message to teens, who with a little direction, can find dozens of vehicles to channel their moral



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outrage into constructive engagement.

Community service offers another avenue for teens. Increasing numbers of high schools are requiring community service for graduation, and the federal government has also come up with several post-high school initiatives. Jewish organizations should take advantage of this environment and create contexts in which Jewish teens can engage in community service under Jewish auspices even as they reach out to help those beyond the borders of the Jewish community.

We must counter the message teens receive that they are "just kids"—which is understood by them as "we don't matter" or "we are powerless." No wonder they log hundreds of hours in front of the TV and the computer. Tell them they can make a difference in society or in the life of someone less fortunate than themselves, and you won't be able to contain their energy!

### 3. INSPIRE

Teens respond to passion and role models. The adults in their lives need to speak from the heart and tell them why it is important to help alleviate some of the pain in the world. They also have to serve as role models.

A couple of years ago, I took my three children, then ages 12, 10, and 8, to South Carolina to help rebuild an African American church that had been burned in a string of arson fires. Living together for that week, all sleeping on the floor of the half-constructed church, meant more than all the lectures I had ever given them.

Adults will often do things for their kids that they would not do on their own—such as getting involved in community service programs to serve as role models for their children. Perhaps an expansion of parent-teen social action projects could lead to a renaissance in the Jewish community's commitment to social justice.

### 4. MOTIVATE

Teens need to know they are needed. In the summer before my senior year of high school, I went with United Synagogue Youth to Eastern Europe and Russia. I remember meeting a young Soviet Jewish woman in her

20s who desperately wanted to emigrate to Israel. We spent the better part of the evening talking, and as we took our leave, she looked me in the eyes and said, "Don't forget us; we need your help." My life was never the same after that moment. I became a Soviet Jewry activist, and that led me to innumerable other causes, a path that eventually came to define both my Judaism and my goals in life.

I have seen hundreds of teens similarly transformed as they look into the eyes of a homeless person and learn the true meaning of *b'tzelem elohim*, that every human being is created in God's image. Moreover, they then start trying to live out the implications of that truth.

We must create such encounters for our teens.

### 5. CONTEXTUALIZE

All of the above we must link to Judaism. We must help teens understand how the values of Judaism inform *tikkun olam* work. Furthermore, teens should come to appreciate that the Jewish community has been in the forefront of most of the leading social justice causes of the last half century.

For too many Jewish adults, doing good works became a substitute for Judaism. It became their religion. The result is that hundreds of thousands of Jews are devoting tremendous amounts of time and resources to many worthy causes, yet they don't have any ties to the Jewish community. This represents the most tragic brain drain in Jewish history. We have lost many of our best and brightest.

We can't afford to make the same mistake with the current generation of teens. They must come to appreciate that Judaism is the religion of which they are a part and that *tikkun olam* is one of the noblest expressions of Judaism.

If we transmit that lesson well, we may just find that the next generation of American Jews will have a lot to teach us.

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