

“Are Jewish Boys an Endangered Species?” (Yitro 5771)

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Whenever I ponder a question of religious meaning I return to the font of all Jewish wisdom, the one source capable of furnishing answers to even life’s most tangled and complex issues: *Fiddler on the Roof*. Sure, *Fiddler* is cliché-ridden and filled with stereotypes; in some ways the Broadway classic says more our rose-colored view of *shtetl* life than the actual experience of our Eastern European forebears. Still . . .

So here’s the scene. I’m sure you remember Tevye’s wonderful number, “If I Were a Rich Man.” At the heart of that song isn’t Tevye’s desire for material wealth, but the freedom to pursue his deepest desire were he free of financial worry: “If I were rich, I’d have the time that I lack to sit in the synagogue and pray, and maybe have a seat by the Eastern Wall. And I’d discuss the holy books with the learned men seven hours every day . . . and that would be the sweetest thing of all.” And then Tevye sighs, and in that sigh we hear the longing of a Jewish man who can’t envision anything more precious than spending meaningful time in prayer and study.

But this is Tevye’s dream, not Golda’s. It’s the dream of the papas and the sons, not the mothers or the daughters. It’s tradition. But let’s be fair -- it wasn’t Jerry Bock’s music or Sheldon Harnick’s lyrics that created this vision: it’s as old as the giving of the Torah itself. When Moses returns with instructions to the Israelites to prepare for Revelation, he adds a caveat which doesn’t appear in God’s words to him: “וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-הָעָם הֲיִינוּ נִכְנָיִם לְשִׁלְשֶׁת יָמִים” -- *וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-הָעָם הֲיִינוּ נִכְנָיִם לְשִׁלְשֶׁת יָמִים* -- And he said to the people, “Be ready for the third day: do not approach a woman” (*Exodus 19:15*). In delicate language what Moshe is really saying is that couples should not engage in sexual intercourse so that neither husband nor wife become ritually defiled and thereby be ineligible to receive Torah . . . far from having sexist intent, Moses’ words reinforce the notion that Torah was given both to men *and* women at Sinai. Indeed, elsewhere *Midrash* goes so far to suggest that, at God’s behest, Moshe communicated Torah to the women *first*, even before speaking to their husbands.

Still, in the story of the giving of Torah as well as elsewhere, the Torah presumes a male audience. Consider an example found in the Ten Commandments itself: לְאִתְּחֵמֹד אִשְׁתּוֹ רְעִי -- You shall not covet the wife of your (male) neighbor.” Fast forward several thousand years and in a popular Orthodox *siddur*, you will see the prayer recited for congregations on Shabbat morning states, “May the Holy One bless this entire holy congregation along with the other holy congregations; them and their wives. . .” No, there is no feminine alternative for women to recite . . . there is a presumption here that the audience is a male one.

We are a synagogue of equal obligation and opportunity for men and women, and have been blessed this morning by a very capable *bat mitzvah* who has served as our *shliḥah tzibbur*. We know there are a variety of views about the extent to which women can or should participate in *shul* life; while respectful of the viewpoints of others, we are thrilled that our girls can *daven*, *layn*, count in a *minyan*, and become cantors, rabbis and educators.

Yet even as we made room for women at the communal table of Torah and *tefillah*, study and prayer, there are others we’re seeing less and less within the fabric of Jewish life. A few statistics to reflect upon: According to the Cohen Center at Brandeis University, only 30% of all Conservative synagogue volunteers are male. In a similar vein, in the vast majority of congregations, the ratio of Sisterhood to Men’s Club membership is generally 2:1, even 3:1. As my colleague Rabbi Chuck Simon notes in his book, *How to Build a Successful Volunteer Culture*, “Men and their needs were simply not being factored into the equation of synagogue life. This point was underscored by a conference devoted to ‘Jews and Gender’ that took place at the Jewish Theological Seminary in the 1990s. It was a conference about women. In crafting the conference agenda, it was as if JTS leaders had forgotten that there were two genders.”

Here in Jacksonville, we are blessed by the engagement of many talented men. Still, if I think about our 8th grade graduating classes from the Martin J. Gottlieb Day School over the

past seven years, there have been palpably more female than male graduates almost each year; the gender gap in 11th grade Confirmation classes has been even more pronounced, while this year, there isn't a single teenage boy in our 12th grade *Siyyum* program; while of 14 USY board positions, only three of them are held by boys. I'm not prepared to make sweeping generalizations from our limited numbers; on the other hand, social researchers, rabbis and Jewish educators across North America are all seeing a trend toward the decreasing engagement of male Jewish teens. Many Jewish communal leaders are beginning to sing, "Where have all the Jews boys gone?"

The answer, my friend, may be blowing in the wind, but we don't have the luxury of waiting to find out. Study after study bears out that behavioral patterns formed in adolescence shape and frame the social context in which the next generation of Jews will make decisions about identity, engagement, the choice of marriage partners and how to rear children. Beyond the issue of whether or not there'll be nice Jewish boys for our daughters, there is the reality that men who marry outside of Judaism are considerably less likely to raise Jewish children with exclusively Jewish identities. Professor Steven Cohen, one of the most outstanding demographers of American Jewry, puts it this way: "There's no question that Jewish women who are intermarried are much more likely to raise their children as Jews than are Jewish men who intermarry. It's well documented. The impact of intermarriage on Jewish continuity is primarily focused on Jewish husbands who marry non-Jewish wives."

My own consciousness of this issue has been raised both professionally and personally. As a rabbi I was fortunate recently to have a thought-provoking conversation at this year's General Assembly of the Jewish Federations of North America, where I learned more about the path-breaking work of *Moving Traditions*, an organization that examines Judaism through the lens of gender. Given that gender is shaped by culture and defines who we are and can become, boys and men, girls and women have different perspectives and view the world in different ways. On a personal note, I also began to notice that many of the teenage boys I rarely saw at synagogue could be found working out regularly at the JCA gym. As this pattern repeated itself time and again, the wheels of my mind began to spin creatively. Perhaps it's not about how to get boys closer to Judaism, but rather how Judaism can get closer to boys. Is there a reason why

pectoral flies, abdominal crunches, or bicep curls couldn't be harnessed to a Jewish end? And if we can't press them to bench the Grace after Meals, maybe we can bench press with them to build spiritual muscle.

This is about much more than how to incorporate athletics into USY. Where and when, if ever, do we talk about masculinity from a Jewish perspective? What are the stereotypes that influence our own self-perceptions? Who's in charge of measuring the "manliness barometer"? Recently, I saw a young man on the cusp of *bar mitzva* stand shivering in the cold winter night; when I expressed my concern lest he catch cold, he informed me that not wearing a coat in the cold was "manly". You can probably guess my internal reaction to this assertion of "manliness," but then it hit me: when I was his age, I probably would have said the same thing. I just can't tell you why.

Having attended Vassar, an all-women college before becoming co-ed in 1969, I was blessed with an education sensitive to gender issues from the perspective of women, a lesson I remember every time I get a letter addressed "Dear Alumnae/i." While continuing to raise consciousness about gender issues for girls, we must now do the same for the boys in our lives, the boys who one day will become Jewish husbands and fathers. What Jewish texts might we explore with teenage boys that relate to manhood and masculinity? How might we create an effective physical space and bring physical activity (yes, I'm constantly reminded by my own three boys that they are restless beings wired for roaming) to such engagement? How do we help them model respect for women and themselves?

We sometimes dismiss this as "touchy-feely" or even irrelevant to Judaism, as if how we behave and think as men has nothing do with our view of being Jewish. Sadly, those who don't see the challenges we face are often themselves the victims of the very stereotypes that are problematic. But our tradition knows better. The founder of the Jewish men's movement was none other than a famous rabbi by the name of Hillel, who, some 2,000 years ago threw down a gauntlet to the generations: **וּבְמָקוֹם שֶׁאֵין אֲנָשִׁים, הִשְׁתַּדֵּל לְהִיּוֹת אִישׁ** -- "In a place where there are no men, strive to be a man." If such is the Torah of Jewish manhood, surely it is received

while standing on one foot. The rest may be commentary, but for the sake of our boys, the men they could become, the fathers they shall one day be, we must go forth and study! See you at the gym . . .