



Putting Gender on the Agenda for Supervisors of Jewish Youth Professionals

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At the JCC in Manhattan, where I work, it's sometimes hard to tell apart the staff who work with our teens and the teens themselves. Youth professionals who work directly with adolescents—including camp counselors, youth-group advisors and student-life directors, as well as formal educators—often enter this work as freshly minted adults. They bring a level of energy, passion and creativity that can put their more senior colleagues to shame. Because of their youth, they claim what anthropologists call “insider status,” which garners them trust and legitimacy as leaders. However, the very qualities that make young professionals so desirable in work with youth also create particular challenges. And, while this issue isn't exclusive to male or female staff, we know that teens look to these teachers and leaders as role models. Whether they are aware of it or not, youth professionals constantly convey messages about gender through their work.

Gender is a key category through which teens discern the rules that govern their social worlds. Throughout the teen years, notions of masculinity and femininity feature prominently in the identities middle- and late-adolescents try out (the football jock, the mean girl, the tomboy). Bestselling books like William Pollack's *Real Boys* and Rachel Simmons' *Odd Girl Out* report that teens—boys and girls alike—describe feeling tremendous pressure to conform to others' rules about gender. Knowledge of these rules comes to teens from many sources: from the real people in their lives (especially those with whom they identify and whom they admire, such as young, dynamic Jewish teachers and advisors) and, just as powerfully, from the popular culture.

Whether it's in the form of Bratz dolls, Disney Princesses or images of men in hip-hop gear, gendered messages in the popular culture are a hot topic among concerned adults. Thinking about the role of Jewish youth professionals in the lives of teens, it is crucial to remember that teens are not the only ones being influenced by mainstream pop culture.

Often, youth professionals are watching the very same TV shows, using the same social-networking websites, and tracking the same ads, fads and celebrity scandals. With guidance and support from supervisors, youth professionals can learn to use pop culture “moments” (that is, teens' offhand comments, song lyrics, or excerpts from films and TV shows) as resources for teaching and pointing out the values and messages embedded in the media they consume. As Ma'yan works to address the needs of girls in the Jewish community, we've learned that cultivating this capacity in youth professionals can serve two ends at once: improving the skills of youth-serving staff and strengthening the effect of programming, regardless of its specific content. One powerful strategy is for supervisors to model attention to gendered language and other cultural messages. This is not the same thing as policing, which consists of either shaming or simply attempting to avoid instances of gender bias. Instead, modeling means actively engaging these issues when they arise.

Riding in an elevator, a senior staff member once shared with me her concern that kvelling over a little girl's spangled tutu had been a mistake, that she'd both reinforced the narrow demands of femininity and implied to the girl's plainly dressed friend that she was less worthy of attention. Sharing her doubt and confusion about how to handle gender in that moment was an act of generosity, a teachable moment well-met. Just as that incident sharpened my ear and challenged my thinking, supervisors' willingness to narrate such moments helps their colleagues to think through similar dilemmas for themselves.

Seizing these opportunities isn't always easy, even for the most experienced among us. Reflecting on these moments threatens to expose the ways we all have compromised our principles around gender. Attempting to ignore double-standards and gendered mixed messages or to resolve them neatly perpetuates the fantasy that they are individual problems, when in fact they are cultural and structural problems that require collective solutions. Sharing our concerns, our intentions and even our fumbles reminds us that we are allies in a shared struggle for tikkun olam.