

PORTRAITS  
OF JEWISH LEARNING

Viewing Contemporary Jewish Education Close-In

Edited by

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*Foreword by David Bryfman*

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GROWING MADRICHIM  
Jewish Adolescents in a Relational Learning  
Community

*Stefani E. Carlson*

FOR THE EDUCATION DIRECTOR of a synagogue supplemental school, the first day back to school after winter break is almost always a busy one. Happy to see one another, teachers and students arrive eager to share stories of their vacation adventures and looking forward to beginning the work of the new semester. On a Sunday morning in January 2017, as I walked around Temple Beth Shalom, a small, exurban Reform Jewish congregation on the outskirts of Cleveland, I heard excited voices greeting each other all over the building. Parents clustered in the foyer, in the hallways, and even outside on the sidewalk on this unusually balmy winter day, catching up with each other's news. Students called out to their friends as they hung up coats and headed into classrooms. Several students and parents responded to my friendly calls of "*boker tov!*" ("good morning!") with tales of trips: to Florida, to visit grandparents, even to Thailand and other exotic locations. "Miss Stefani, I got to pet a tiger, and he wasn't even in a zoo!" exclaimed a first-grader. "Go find my mom, she has pictures!" Teachers, looking forward to that evening's community-wide *Erev Iyyun* (Evening of Learning), which would bring together religious school teachers from throughout our city for a speaker and workshops, stopped me to ask about logistics and carpool

arrangements. Our congregation's board of directors and Brotherhood were also meeting that morning. The whole building was full, energized with the joyous sounds of this tightly-knit community reconnecting after a few weeks away.

With all this happy chaos in the building, it was no surprise that it was well into the morning before I had a moment to stop by the kitchen for a cup of coffee. While I was there, I overheard part of a conversation that made me take notice and gave me great pleasure:

Jacob<sup>1</sup>: Hey, Mike, do you have David in your class?

Mike: Yeah, why?

Jacob: I was asked to pull him out for some extra Hebrew practice today. But the last time I worked with him, he really seemed to be struggling to remember anything at all. It was as if he didn't even know the letters. I wondered if you have any ideas about things that you think work well with him.

Mike: Hmm . . . I think he knows the letters, he just gets frustrated and gives up really quickly if he doesn't recognize the words right away. It's hard when he's in class, because he gets embarrassed that the other kids are watching him, and sometimes they're not real nice about it, so he just quits. Maybe if you can get him to at least try when you're one-on-one with him, you can see if he actually knows anything and then kinda go from there.

Jacob: OK, thanks. That helps. I'll come get him in a few minutes.

Had this conversation taken place between two veteran teachers I would have been pleased, but not particularly surprised. What was remarkable about it was that it occurred between two teenage boys, both high school sophomores, who were volunteering as *madrichim* (teaching assistants) in the religious school, and that until I walked into the room at the tail end of the conversation, there were no adults present at all. The discussion happened organically, without prompting by a teacher or other facilitator, and was entirely based in the teens' own desire to help the student learn, as well as their trust in each other as sounding boards and sources of potential help. No one told them to have this conversation—they were both on break, just as I was. Nor did they engage me in the discussion, even after I entered the room: their own dialogue was sufficient to meet their purposes. While they greeted me warmly and we

1 All names of teachers, teens and students are pseudonyms. Some identifying characteristics have been changed to protect privacy. Conversations are reconstructed from notes and may not be verbatim.

visited for a few moments as we poured our coffee, the conversation did not turn back to the subject of the student. It was only much later, during a scheduled interview, that I debriefed the exchange with them and came to appreciate its potential significance in terms of the kind of growth and transformative learning that Temple Beth Shalom's teen engagement program had begun to foster.

### **Setting: The Madrichim Project**

At the time of the break room conversation described above, the two boys involved had been participants in the pilot cohort of the congregation's innovative *Gesher* program (a three-pronged approach to post b'nai mitzvah engagement that includes classroom learning, youth group, and social action projects) for more than three years.<sup>2</sup> For the eighteen months leading up to that January morning, a key component of their participation in the *Gesher* program was their service as *madrichim* in the religious school and their inclusion in the intergenerational professional development program which I created to integrate the teens into the religious school faculty.

During the spring of 2015, the eighth-graders in Temple Beth Shalom's *Gesher* program met with me to co-create what would happen during their ninth-grade year. In this planning discussion the students indicated that they wanted to replace the social action component of their post b'nai mitzvah programming with work as *madrichim* in the religious school. Although individual students had volunteered in the religious school in previous years, there had never been a group of students serving together before, nor had there been any structured plan for the professional development of *madrichim*. During that spring meeting, we determined a structure for their involvement in the year ahead:

- class learning time would be reduced to one Sunday a month
- youth group meetings would be given a bit more structure and direction to encourage leadership development
- the teens would commit to attending four of the five scheduled faculty meetings for the year (including the orientation session before

2. For more information about the *Gesher* program, see: <http://urj.org/blog/2017/05/04/how-we-bridged-gap-post-bnai-mitzvah-engagement>.

the beginning of the school year and the wrap-up meeting at the end of the year), in order to learn alongside their mentor teachers

As I engaged with the teens in the negotiations around this agreement, I was struck by the mutually supportive nature of this group. While the majority was eager to work with younger students, one boy was hesitant. I was impressed by how the group talked their classmate through his resistance and found a way for him to participate that was more comfortable for him (by volunteering during weekday Hebrew school instead of on Sundays, and working with me on projects rather than in a classroom). Given the collaborative spirit of the group, I had reason to think about how to leverage this relational atmosphere to improve the teens' learning in the new *madrichim* program.

### Teens in a Relational Learning Community

During the summer between my planning conversation with the teens and the official start of the new program, I did quite a bit of reading about the different models and theories of *madrichim* training that already existed, to see how they might guide the development of this endeavor. I found Patti Kroll's article, "Working with Teen Assistants," with its extensive references and portraits particularly helpful, especially around the idea of "growing" teen assistants;<sup>3</sup> this image resonated with my learning goals for the teens in this cohort. The work of Richard and Elaine Solomon<sup>4</sup> served as a bridge between the literature on teen engagement and the theories of learning and professional development that would ultimately form the foundations of the project. While I found useful information in curriculum-focused pieces such as Lisa Bob Howard's *Madrichim Manual*<sup>5</sup> fairly early in my planning process, I rejected the idea of a parallel learning track for the teens as not conducive to the inter-generational learning I wanted to have take place. I elected instead an approach in which the *madrichim* would learn alongside their mentor teachers in joint professional development sessions. Significantly, that summer I entered a professional development program as a learner

3. See Kroll, "Working with Teen Assistants."

4. Solomon and Solomon, *Toolbox for Teachers and Mentors*.

5. Howard, *The Madrichim Manual*.

myself, an experience that ultimately shaped the theoretical framework I brought to this project.<sup>6</sup>

Miriam Raider-Roth, director of the Mandel Teacher Educator Institute (MTEI), posits that for teachers, an optimal learning environment occurs when they can belong to a Relational Learning Community (RLC), a systematic “learning group” in which there is an intentional commitment to “the construction and nurturing of relationships between and among the participants, facilitators, texts/content, and context.”<sup>7</sup> In my planning for the new *madrachim* program at Temple Beth Shalom, I began to wonder what it would look like for the teens’ learning to take place within this type of structured and intentional environment, in which the relationships between the members of the cohort of *madrachim*, their mentor teachers, and the rest of the faculty and professional staff of the congregation would be seen as just as vital to the educational process as the content material being presented. As *madrachim*, the teens would need to learn important information, including Hebrew, Jewish texts, theories of teaching and learning, and practical classroom skills. I anticipated that their participation in a RLC could enable them to cultivate new types of relationships across the congregational community to support that learning.

The potential developmental benefits of a RLC to the *madrachim* might also extend well beyond the classroom. Not only would the teens be building peer relationships with each other, they would also be forging supportive bonds with their mentor teachers and other adults. By entering into mutually enriching mentoring relationships, and forming ties with clergy and administrators within the RLC, the *madrachim* would find role models from whom to shape their own sense of self. That this learning and development would all be taking place among a group of Jewish participants within the context of a Jewish school was also significant: the *madrachim* would be learning to be both Jewish teachers *and* competent and impactful Jewish adults.

6. This project is closely tied to my participation in Cohort 7 of the Mandel Teacher Educator Institute (MTEI) and the associated Certificate in Jewish Education program at the University of Cincinnati and reflects the theoretical framework of those programs. More information can be found at: [www.mtei-learning.org](http://www.mtei-learning.org).

7. Raider-Roth, *Professional Development in Relational Learning Communities*, 2.



### **Madrachim and Mentors in Egalitarian Learning**

A distinctive (and possibly unique) feature of the RLC we developed at Temple Beth Shalom was that, by design, it was inter-generational and highly egalitarian. This group of students had been involved in the co-creation of their own learning experience since the *Gesher* program's inception in 2013, meeting each spring with administrators and teachers to set the priorities and schedule for the coming year. This process had afforded them an exceptional sense of ownership over and investment in their own Jewish learning and identity development. In turn, the teachers with whom they were working had been studying the "educative mentoring" model,<sup>8</sup> a democratizing and relational approach to teacher education in which the role of the more experienced partner is to help the novice think through the complexities of teaching and learning, rather than to dictate a particular course of action.

In the RLC, the *madrachim* worked alongside the teachers who served as their mentors and attended faculty meetings and trainings as equal partners. By learning together, the teachers and *madrachim* developed what education theorist David Hawkins describes as learning relationships built on "a shared concern."<sup>9</sup> Through collaborative discourse teachers and students "have a common theme for discussion, they are involved together in the world."<sup>10</sup> In the context of the RLC at Temple Beth Shalom, common themes included such diverse elements as Jewish texts, student work, classroom strategies, and the subject of teaching and learning itself. Because the teens and their mentor teachers learned side-by-side in professional development sessions, the power structure of the classroom was equalized, with teachers and *madrachim* relating to each other in a more egalitarian way than is typical of most classroom aides and their teacher supervisors. This shift in stance contributed to the formation of deep mentoring relationships that impacted the learning of the teens and teachers, as well as their younger students.

8. Feiman-Nemser, "Helping Novices Learn to Teach," 17.

9. Hawkins, "I, Thou, and It," 58.

10. Hawkins, "I, Thou, and It," 57.

## From Project to Portrait: Focusing on Mike and Jacob

During the summer of 2015, I drafted an outline for the faculty meetings and leadership development sessions that would form the backbone of the RLC. Once the program was in place, however, it was clear that more than a curriculum would be necessary for me to fully assess the impact of this new structure. Even though there was already evidence of a high retention rate in the *Gesher* program, I wanted to probe in-depth the ways in which the *madrachim's* participation in an RLC alongside their mentor teachers impacted the teens' learning, development, and engagement in Jewish life.

To more carefully track the students' experience, during the 2015 and 2016 school years I collected qualitative data in the form of written and oral reflections from participants, notes and recordings from professional development sessions, classroom observations, and participant interviews. I also documented the teens' level of Jewish engagement by tracking their involvement in congregational and community-based programs. As I began to analyze the data, four episodes, each involving Mike and Jacob, stood out as representative of different stages in the process of maturation, transformative learning, and professional development that was taking place among all the teens in the *madrachim* program. Upon closer examination, I realized that the two boys had very different ways of engaging with the learning environment, and that these differences provided insight into how the RLC affects different people in different ways.

### Episode 1: Mike and Jacob as Learners (Summer 2015)

If I had needed to choose the students to be the subject of this portrait based on the first RLC meeting of the 2015–16 school year, Mike and Jacob would have been far down the list. While they were eager to participate in the program from the beginning, their behavior at the RLC orientation session was less than exemplary. Their reaction to and level of participation in the session did, however, provide an excellent baseline by which to measure their learning over the subsequent two years of their participation in the program. Additionally, the differing patterns of engagement which characterized their individual learning approaches were clear, even from this first encounter.

To launch the *madrachim* program and to set the stage for the learning the teens and teachers would do together, I invited all of them to a

half-day orientation retreat, to be held at the temple on the Sunday before the first day of religious school in August. While all of the teens in the *Gesher* cohort had expressed interest in volunteering in the school when we discussed it during the spring meeting, I was curious as to whether giving the program more structure and requirements might turn them off. In fact, the opposite turned out to be true: the teens responded to my invitation by saying that they felt more comfortable about the idea of working as *madrichim* knowing that there would be a structure in place to support them in learning to work with students. Fourteen people, evenly divided between adults and teens, attended this initial meeting. This was the first time in the known history of the congregation that teens had attended the faculty orientation meeting, so the change in tone for the year was immediately established.

The session began with introductions (including the icebreaker question, “What brings you here today?”), and a general welcome and introduction of the year’s theme: “Professionalizing our School.” We then transitioned into text study, using a text from Talmud which describes a teacher’s personal rituals for entering and exiting his classroom<sup>11</sup>:

Rabbi Nehunya’s Prayer

Mishnah, Tractate *Berakhot* 4:2

רבי נְחוּנְיָא בֶן הַקְנָה הָיָה מִתְפַּלֵּל בְּכַנְיֶסְתּוֹ לְבֵית הַמְדֻרָשׁ וּבִיצִיאָתוֹ תְּפִלָּה קְצָרָה. אָמְרוּ לוֹ: מָה מְקוּם לְתַפְּלָה זוֹ? אָמַר לָהֶם: בְּכַנְיֶסְתִּי אֲנִי מִתְפַּלֵּל שְׁלֹא תֵאָרַע תְּקֵלָה עַל יָדֵי, וּבִיצִיאָתִי אֲנִי נוֹתֵן הוֹדְיָה עַל חִלְקִי

Rabbi Nehunyah used to pray a short prayer on his entrance to the Beit Midrash. They [his students or colleagues] said to him, “What is the nature [literally, “the place”] of this prayer?” He said to them: “When I enter I pray that no mishap [or “offense,” literally it means “stumbling”] take place because of me, and when I leave I give thanks for my lot.”

The inclusion of the text study exercise was directly related to the theme of professionalization. I considered it critical for teachers and *madrichim* alike to understand that to be a “professional” teacher, one must also be a learner, and that reflection on one’s own learning can (and should) inform one’s teaching practices. More specifically to the text, the themes of creating sacred space in the classroom, and of marking the

11. This text study worksheet is from the materials developed by Professor Barry W. Holtz for MTEI Cohort 7, Seminar 1, June 29, 2015.

division between that space and time and the “outside world” through the use of *kavannah* (prayer and intention), were also central to the discussion, which I guided using questions such as:

- Why do you think Rabbi Nehunya paused for prayer before entering the Beit Midrash?
- How do you set your intention before you enter your classroom?
- How do you feel at the end of each class? What factors impact your emotional state?

In terms of process, I asked the participants to divide themselves into *havruta* (learning pairs) but gave no direction as to the composition of the pairs. While the majority of the group formed pairs consisting of a *madrich(a)* and a teacher, two *madrachim*, Mike and Jacob, chose to study the text together.

Most of the attendees appeared very eager to participate in text study; several commented that they had not done an exercise like this one before, and several others said that they liked the idea of beginning a faculty meeting with a learning session. Mike and Jacob, on the other hand, had significant difficulty staying on task. Photos of the event show them deeply engaged not in text study but in opening and examining the contents of Kinder Surprise eggs.<sup>12</sup> Only with significant prodding and redirection were they able to get through the partner discussion assignment. Their participation in the larger group discussion was limited to replying when called upon. Their responses, although brief, were at least on topic. When asked what had changed between the two prayers quoted in the text, Mike responded, “What changed is that he [Rabbi Nehunyah] knew how the lesson went, so he wasn’t worried about it any more, and could relax.”

On the other hand, throughout the orientation meeting I observed that these boys seemed to be very much enjoying being in each other’s company, talking and laughing together animatedly (they did not attend the same school, and their socialization with each other was generally limited to the context of the congregation and its activities), and staying

12. Kinder Surprise eggs are foil-wrapped hollow chocolate eggs, manufactured by the Italian company Ferrero, each of which contains a plastic capsule in which a small toy or other surprise is hidden. They are not available for sale in the US, but are a commonly-traded item among TBS students who attend events of the North East Lakes Region of the National Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY)—a region that includes teens from Canada as well the States.

together (including other students in their group as well) during breaks. And, while they might be described as having passively endured the text study activity rather than engaged in it, they did, in fact, complete the written assignment that followed the discussion, which was to write their own prayer for the beginning of the new school year.

Mike's prayer: "To learn and be kind to others and be helpful to everyone and the Earth and to maybe even teach someone so that they learn and can help everyone and the Earth too."

Jacob's prayer: "I want to make a positive educational impact on the students in the fields of both Jewish values and the fine arts relating to Judaism."

The boys' responses, even in this very first assignment, showed the different types of connections each of them made to the learning environment, which formed the pathways and motivations for their participation in the program. Mike, in his mention of "others," "everyone," and "someone," revealed the *relational* stance driving his involvement. This is a student who comes to temple because his friends are there. During the spring discussion leading to the formation of the *madrichim* program, his stated interest in working in the classroom was because he genuinely enjoys interacting with the teachers and the younger students: "I think it would be cool to hang out with [his future mentor teacher] and the kids, and help them learn," he said. At his public school, Mike is a well-rounded student, with good grades and high levels of involvement and achievement in sports and other extracurricular activities. He is, however, one of only a handful of Jews in his town (and has never attended Jewish summer camp), so he relies on the temple as the primary source of his Jewish community involvement and as the place where he can experiment with finding his own Jewish identity. He is popular with his peers, and at the time of the orientation meeting was serving as membership vice president of the temple youth group.

Jacob, in citing the content areas of "Jewish values" and "the fine arts" reflected a more *academic*, information-driven stance. He had said during the spring planning meeting that he wanted to participate because he is interested in the content matter to be taught and in the pedagogical processes of learning to be a teacher: "I think that if I work in our religious school, I can be prepared to be a Hebrew teacher when I am in college." He is an excellent, highly-motivated student in his public school

as well, taking multiple AP and other advanced classes each year, and is also deeply involved in the performing arts. He is less dependent on the temple as the source of his Jewish community involvement, as he attends a school where a significant proportion of the students are Jewish (enough that the school is closed on the High Holy Days), has parents who are Jewish professionals, and has attended Jewish summer camp for many years. While relatively new to the congregation, and therefore lacking in some of the communal history with the other teens, he is also well-liked by his peers and at the time of the orientation meeting was serving as communications vice president of the temple youth group.

The orientation meeting, especially the text study activity, ultimately served a number of important purposes: it established the *madrachim* as members of the faculty and full partners with the teachers in learning; it set a precedent for teachers and *madrachim* to view themselves foremost as learners; it built community among the faculty; it introduced the idea of a Jewish classroom as a sacred place in space and time; it highlighted the importance of the role of teachers in ensuring the Jewish future; and it empowered the faculty to make changes in their classrooms. Most important, it established a precedent for communal study and professional development to form an integral part of what had previously been viewed as business meetings, and for text study as a basis for future *madrachim* workshops. The text itself made explicit the connection between learning, reflecting, and teaching. The learning was conducted in *havruta*, a traditionally Jewish form of study, which helps to reinforce the message of a text.<sup>13</sup> While Mike and Jacob's level of participation was limited, they did say they enjoyed the experience and were eager to begin their work with the students, providing a foundation for their learning in the RLC.

The participants' reflections and written prayers helped me to pair *madrachim* with mentor teachers for the year ahead. Since Jacob mentioned the arts in his prayer and is active in arts activities in his public school, I assigned him to the music teacher as his mentor. A college professor in addition to serving as music teacher and cantorial soloist of the congregation, this teacher was able to engage Jacob in the type of high-level idea-focused conversation that would keep him interested in the work of the school. And because Mike had mentioned the Earth, and had also spoken of the need to help people and to "relax" in the classroom, I assigned him to work with our sixth- and seventh-grade *Tanakh*

13. Holzer and Kent, *A Philosophy of Havruta*.

(Bible) teacher, who had an extensive background in Jewish mysticism and in martial arts and who held a deeply spiritual and relational view of learning.

### Episode 2: Adolescent Rebellion (Fall 2015)

It is unrealistic to expect that any attempt at transformative change on an institutional level, such as implementing a complex *madrichim* program as part of an intergenerational RLC, will happen overnight or without complication. Indeed, organizational theorists warn educators that change will likely be fraught with resistance and transitions marked by moments of failure as well as success.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, just as the adolescent period of human development is often marked by turbulence as teens learn to navigate their new roles and frames of reference, as the *madrichim* program moved along it was rocked by turbulence—and even rebellion—as the teens and teachers settled, sometimes uneasily, into their new roles.

In the first year of implementing the intergenerational RLC, the intentional democratization of the learning process brought with it unexpected challenges. Throughout the year, the teens who were learning to serve as *madrichim* were being introduced to egalitarian dynamics in the faculty meetings and *madrichim* leadership development sessions. They were expected to serve as co-creators of learning with others in the RLC. By midyear, however, a shift occurred when the *madrichim* realized that the situation in their monthly *Gesher* classes was not as egalitarian as had been their experiences in faculty meetings and leadership development sessions. A catalyst for rebellion occurred in October, when the *Gesher* class teacher began to teach a lesson that (he later acknowledged) he had recycled from teaching at a Jewish day school that focused on a text study related to an upcoming holiday. Offended by what they perceived as a lesson that was “too babyish” and “not what we agreed to,” the *madrichim* refused to participate in the activity. When the teacher pushed back and attempted to continue with his plan, Mike, Jacob, and a third classmate got up and left the classroom in a clear act of civil disobedience.

For me as the school’s education director, this uncharacteristic behavior provided an unexpected “teachable moment” about *kavod* (respect/honor) to teachers, classroom management . . . and about speaking

14. Guskey, “Professional Development and Teacher Change,” 381–91.

truth to power. A few minutes after the conflict with their teacher, I found the teens outside engaged in a heated venting session. They were outraged at having been overruled on the lesson content and initially refused my offer to mediate. They were not yet ready to re-engage with the teacher. Eventually, they did agree to come sit down with me for some more constructive discussion. Interestingly, in this conversation Jacob's and Mike's differing stances again came through. Jacob was angry because the topic of the lesson was not what he had agreed to study, reflecting his content-focused pathway of connection. Mike, on the other hand, was more upset that the teacher (his mentor teacher, albeit in a different class setting) had not listened to them when they complained and had continued to teach the lesson over their objections, reflecting his relational pathway of connection. Once the teens felt heard and had calmed down, I accompanied them back to class and sat in as an observer for the rest of the session. When the class reconvened, the students were able to complete the lesson and to express calmly to the teacher what they wanted in the future. Several highly productive conversations ensued—between the students and their teacher, the teacher and myself, and myself and the students—which informed planning for future lessons.

In the *madrachim* leadership development session that took place shortly after this incident, I encouraged the teens to apply their reflection on what they had learned as “learners” in this situation to what they might learn about themselves as “teachers.” By asking questions requiring them to think about and discuss how the students with whom they work might feel in a similar situation, and how they might handle the scenario differently if they were the teacher, I sought to help them gain a deeper understanding of others’ perspectives. The ability to look at the world through others’ eyes, and to shift one’s own actions accordingly, is frequently cited as one of the most significant developmental changes between adolescence and adulthood, and is also a characteristic of transformative learning.<sup>15</sup>

### **Episode 3: Acquiring Broader Perspective (Winter-Spring 2016)**

During the second half of the year, Mike and Jacob began to demonstrate greater self-insight and a broader perspective about their roles as

15. Mezirow, “Transformative Learning,” 5–12.



teachers. In a leadership development session in January, I invited them to reflect on the prayers they had written at the fall orientation meeting, asking:

- Looking back at your prayer for the year that you wrote in Meeting #1, do you feel like you are on track to fulfill it? What do you think you want/need to do to better actualize your prayer?
- Is there anything about your prayer which you would change? What is your prayer now, at the end of the first semester? What do you hope your prayer will be at the end of the year?

Their responses showed that both were starting to realize that some of their previously held assumptions—their “truths”—might need to be adjusted to accommodate others’ realities:

Jacob’s responses:

1. I feel that I am succeeding in making my students enthusiastic and spirited in religious education, which in turn causes them to understand their educational materials/ lessons better. I may need to be even more enthusiastic, though, because specific children are more introverted and require extra motivation to willingly engage in learning about Judaism. I have trouble with being able to relate to those children.
2. In my prayer I do not mention anything about altering my own teaching approach to be more safe or make the experience more fun. I would add these motives to my prayer.

Mike’s Responses:

1. Yes. I think I need to maybe help a little more and try to have a happy aura that flows through others.
2. I like it the way it is. To keep on keepin’ on and live life. I hope my prayer to help others will never change.

In these written reflections, Jacob’s responses were considerably longer than Mike’s and were more explicit about his perceived impact on his students’ learning. He again mentioned content (“educational materials/lessons” and “learning about Judaism”), and was more detailed in expressing his thinking about pedagogy (“causes them to understand,” “require extra motivation,” and “altering my own teaching”). He also acknowledged his own difficulties and shortcomings, particularly in the

area of relating to children unlike himself. The solution he offered—“to be even more enthusiastic”—may or may not actually have helped to bridge that gap; however, his acknowledgment that he may need to change his “teaching approach” to accommodate others demonstrated a significant level of reflection on his developing practice as a teacher.

Mike’s written responses were brief, but they were consistent with his outward-focused relational stance. For example, not just wanting to “have a happy aura” but for it to “flow through others.” He, too, indicated that he was beginning to reflect on his practice and consider that he might need to make changes to “help a little more.” Furthermore, in my notes of the teens’ verbal responses during the discussion portion of the meeting (in which Mike and Jacob both participated voluntarily, in contrast to the fall orientation session), I recorded several comments Mike made about the responses of the students in his class to the Hebrew games he was designing to help them build their decoding skills (e.g., “They like it when I let them pop bubble wrap as a reward. It calms them down, and they actually will read more if I let them do it, so can we please get some more?”).

Later in the first year of the program, Mike participated in a video investigation project in which a group of teachers and *madrachim* watched a video of a classroom and practiced observing the teacher. Responding to the question “What does the teacher do to help her students learn?” Mike wrote: “Kids remember old teachings, showing that they retain information previously taught.” This response would appear to indicate a shift in his thinking: instead of simply recording what the teacher was doing, he was looking for evidence of student learning. Similarly, during the last faculty meeting of the year, as his final reflection/exit prayer Jacob wrote: “I pray that my contributions caused the students to engage in their studies later in Hebrew school and continue Jewish learning.” Overall, Mike and Jacob’s responses during this period of time suggest a shift in focus from the immediate to the future. Rather than focusing on their own actions and feelings in any given moment, both had begun looking for evidence of impact and to demonstrate understanding that their actions can have lasting effects on their students.

### Episode 4: Transitioning to Jewish Adulthood (Spring 2016-Spring 2017)

During the planning meeting at the end of the first year of the *madrichim* program (Spring 2016), the teens in the pilot cohort agreed that, since they were beginning to become more active with the Reform youth movement (NFTY) on a regional level, which would require more time, and since they were going to be starting more formal confirmation classes with the rabbi in the fall, they would not include service as *madrichim* as a mandatory cohort commitment for the following school year. Although it was no longer a requirement, five teens began the second year serving as *madrichim*, and attended the full-day faculty professional development retreat that summer. However, with the increased demands of school, extra-curricular activities, and NFTY, their attendance soon became spotty. By midyear, only Mike was attending regularly; Jacob participated when his schedule permitted. None of the other teens in the cohort volunteered more than a couple of times in the second semester of their sophomore year, although all completed the confirmation class and related requirements. In a year and a half, Mike and Jacob had developed from the disengaged teens playing with Kinder eggs during the initial orientation meeting into the leaders of their cohort in the *madrichim* program.

So what had changed? In the winter of 2017, I arranged with Mike and Jacob to interview them about their experiences as *madrichim*, what they had learned as members of the RLC, and their plans for the future. We decided to conduct the first interview informally, as a walk-and-talk during our congregational *shabbaton* (retreat) in February. As we walked the long boardwalk that skirted the partially-frozen lake at the state park lodge where the congregation was celebrating Tu B'Shevat, our conversation ranged all over the place, from what movies they were seeing, to what classes they were taking (and planning to take) at school, to Mike's new baby sister, to our beautiful and interesting natural surroundings. While for the most part I let the conversation go where they wanted to take it, I seized on this moment of openness to ask them what kept them coming to volunteer as *madrichim* after the rest of their peers had drifted away. While both mentioned some parental pressure to continue, they both acknowledged strong intrinsic motivation for participating—which corresponded to their initial feelings of connection to specific elements of the learning environment.

Mike spoke at length about his relationship with his mentor teacher, with whom he had continued to work for a second year. He said that he valued their partnership and felt that he had been given space and support to grow and to develop his skills in the classroom: “He lets me try new games and stuff with the kids, and if they work, great, and if they’re not into it, he’s there to help.” Mike said that he enjoyed his work with the kids in the class, which included his younger brother, and felt that being together in this context had given them a valuable bonding experience: “It’s different when we’re at Sunday school. He’s less annoying there.” He indicated that he also appreciated the “down time” that coming to the religious school afforded him. “It’s just nice to be able to go to TBS and hang out with [his mentor teacher], and learn, and be with the kids, and just relax and not have to worry about stuff.”

Jacob, on the other hand, had chosen not to continue working with the music teacher for a second year. Instead, because his Hebrew skills were the most advanced of the teens in his cohort, he decided to train under my supervision to become a one-on-one Hebrew tutor for students who needed extra support. Sometimes he worked with students like David (the student mentioned in the dialogue at the beginning of this paper) who required remediation in their basic Hebrew decoding skills. Other times, he sat with students who were studying for their bar or bat mitzvah, to listen to them practice prayers or their Torah portions. Occasionally, he helped with behavioral issues, accompanying students who needed sensory breaks or giving one-on-one attention to those who were too shy to speak up in class regularly. Jacob said that he found that the variety of this type of work kept him more engaged (“It’s just more interesting when every day is different, you know?”), and that he enjoyed the intellectual exercise of trying to understand each student’s needs and respond to them accordingly. He and I had several other conversations over the course of the semester in which his most frequent questions were “Why do you want me to work with this kid?” and “What do you think s/he is going to get out of the one-on-one time?” Occasionally, if he did not, as he put it, “feel equipped to handle” the child’s needs, he would push back on an assignment. He had begun to look ahead, to a time when he could potentially earn some income as a Hebrew teacher or tutor once he was in college, the prospect of which appealed to him. He emphasized the importance of having the religious school as a “safe space” where he could come and hang out and just be himself. He also shared that he valued having adults other than his parents with whom

to talk about things like his interests in literature, film, and many other wide-ranging topics—people he could use as sounding boards for issues such as his desire to take more AP-level classes than his parents thought appropriate.

A further conversation with Mike and Jacob took place during their Confirmation class trip, an overnight journey to Cincinnati which included a “Jewish Life on Campus” tour led by an alumnus of our school who was then a student at the University of Cincinnati and very active in Hillel, a Jewish fraternity, and other Jewish organizations on campus. After the tour, I asked the boys for their impressions. While much of their response was limited to flippant remarks about how messy and smelly they had found the fraternity house, they also commented on several other things they had seen and people they had met, and said that they had found the experience valuable. They were particularly interested in the fact that someone from their small congregation could go on to hold so many leadership roles in the Jewish community on campus, and what that trajectory might look like for them when their time came. Later in the spring, when describing the trip in a speech he gave at their cohort’s Confirmation service, Mike wrote:

I saw that college can be a place where people can be themselves without having to worry about what other people think. As a young man in the Jewish community, a place where everyone is accepted sounds pretty good to me . . . I can imagine college as a place where everyone is accepted and everyone has a place in the community.

Again, Mike’s strong relational awareness provided him a lens through which to see his Jewish future in a positive light, even if it was still unclear what that future would be.

In May 2017, on the last day Jacob volunteered in the school, I had an interaction with him that reflected this transitional state through his more academic lens. He asked me if he could sit in my office and study instead of working with students that morning, as he was worried about needing to prepare more for an AP test he was taking the next day. I asked him why, if he had so much schoolwork, he had come to the temple at all. His reply was honest and reflected an extrinsic motivation: “My parents made me.” Yet a couple of hours later, when I declared a study break and sent him to the nearby park to assist a teacher who was taking her class for some outdoor Hebrew games as a reward for good behavior, he took

the initiative to take photographs of the event and text them to me with the message “because I know you like to *document* things like this.” I found his choice of words significant because documenting classroom activities with photographs, video, and audio recordings for the purpose of later study was a concept we had discussed frequently in professional development sessions. In the end-of-the-year reflection he subsequently wrote, he mentioned his appreciation of the extra study time that day and also my having helped him “gain tutoring abilities I can forevermore use in my future.” Like Mike, Jacob’s words showed that he was beginning to look at his Jewish future and to see how his participation in the *madrachim* program might help him achieve his goals.

### **Jewish Adolescents Learning in a Relational Context**

In our modern world, where practically unlimited information is available at the touch of a screen, it is not enough to define the goal of education solely as the acquisition of knowledge. Educational leaders must pay attention to how students, particularly teens and adults, use learning experiences to shape and reframe their senses of self. If we return to the break room conversation with which this portrait opened, we see evidence of the type of *shift in frame of reference* that defines what educational theorist Jack Mezirow labels “transformative learning.”<sup>16</sup> It is not just the acquisition of information that is important for learning to occur, Mezirow says, but also the development of interpersonal relationships and communication skills which ultimately will help the learner to process and apply this information in various contexts, particularly in situations which challenge the learner’s previously-held assumptions.<sup>17</sup>

The break room conversation was an example of the teens using their peer relationships as a pathway of support when faced with a challenge in the learning environment. As teacher development expert Thomas Guskey points out, for teachers (of any age) to become proficient, they have to learn new ways of doing things; although change brings a measure of anxiety and uncertainty, with support from others they gradually

16. Mezirow, “Transformative Learning,” 5.

17. While there has recently emerged some controversy around the use of the language of transformative learning to describe Jewish education programs (See Levisohn, “Theories of Transformative Learning,” 209–38), these developmental theories are central to the theoretical framework of MTEI, as described above, and were therefore integral to the framework of this project.

acquire an increased sense of their own authority.<sup>18</sup> Jacob's solution to his concerns—both about how to handle a student's difficulties *and* his own difficulties as a novice tutor in working with the student—was to seek out a friend who had experience with the same student in a different classroom context. In so doing he found the support he needed and he created a mutual learning situation.

Transformative learning, with its emphasis on examining one's own assumptions and working in dialogue with peers to reshape them, has been recognized by many scholars as essential to both personal and professional development for adults and adolescents. Developmental psychologist Robert Kegan argues that because adolescence is a transitional time when teens' "meaning-making" about the world and their place in it undergoes profound change, transformative learning experiences are not only desirable, but necessary.<sup>19</sup> Like Mezirow, Kegan places the locus of transformative learning within meaningful interpersonal relationships, suggesting that during this time of transition adolescents need to engage in a new type of peer interaction in which shared experiences, and dialogue about those experiences, can help them to construct their understanding of the world and their behavioral choices.

The break room conversation between Mike and Jacob seems to be evidence of these teens' emergent transformative learning. It occurred spontaneously, driven not by a facilitator but by the needs of the participants. Mike and Jacob solved their problem in dialogue, helping each other to examine their assumptions about the situation at hand. This brief interchange also suggests the beginnings of a shift in frame of reference in how these teens had begun to think of themselves—as teachers. It reflects the teens' concern with themselves and the quality of their own interactions with the student, and with the substance of the student's learning. Furthermore, they did not consider how the student's behavior affected them—which might be expected in a casual venting session—but how their behavior affected the student's learning experience. The student-centered nature of this exchange attests to Mike and Jacob having begun to become less egocentric<sup>20</sup> and able to take into account the points of view of their peers and students along with their own. This, Kegan would

18. Guskey, "Professional Development and Teacher Change," 381–91.

19. Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*, 32.

20. Elkind, "Egocentrism in Adolescence," 1025–34.

suggest, exemplifies the type of psychological growth necessary for adolescents who are making their way toward adult life and responsibility.

Transformative learning does not happen in a vacuum. By its very definition, it depends on relationships with others. Kegan, Guskey, and Mezirow, as well as many other educational theorists, pay close attention to the types of learning environments that are conducive to this type of growth. Relational Learning Communities, as described by Raider-Roth and others, are one response to the need for transformative learning in the professional development of teachers. The experience of Mike and Jacob in the RLC at Temple Beth Shalom suggests that the benefits of this type of professional development are not limited to adults, nor are they limited to the classroom setting. These teens' participation in an intergenerational, relationship-driven learning environment provided them with a profound Jewish learning experience and the opportunity to explore pathways toward their futures as Jewish adults. For Mike, this was an interpersonal connection, and for Jacob, an academic one. For another student it might be something different. By including teens in meaningful intergenerational relational learning experiences such as these, we can help them to build and strengthen these connections, leading to transformative learning and emotional growth.

The overall experiences of the two teens in this study resonate strongly with the findings of current research in the area of teen engagement, which conclude that the types of programs which are most impactful are "mission-driven and aspirational programs that allow teens to be challenged and inspired," and which seek to answer these "important 'teen centered' questions":

How . . .

- will this engage me intellectually, physically, and socially?
- can I share this with my friends? (Jewish and other)
- will this help me feel more connected to the many communities in which I exist?
- can I apply this to my life?
- will this help me develop skills that will benefit my life?
- will this help me feel proud of being Jewish?
- will this help me be a better citizen of the world?



- will this help me make the world a better place?”<sup>21</sup>

As illustrated in the portraits of Mike and Jacob above, the *madrichim* program at Temple Beth Shalom offered its participants the opportunity to uncover their own answers to many of these essential questions. By creating space for relational learning, and paying attention to the pathways through which individual teens connect to the learning environment, educational leaders can strengthen teens’ engagement in Jewish life and help them to shape their visions of their Jewish futures.

### Further Reflections About Jewish Learning

A question I hear often in conversations with Jewish professionals is “how do we get them to . . . ?” Much of the time, the question arises because we have an idea of what we want to do, or a program that already exists, and we want the magic formula that will make more people attend. After all, they can’t engage in Jewish learning if they don’t come to class, right?

What I discovered in the process of developing and studying the *madrichim* program is the power of flipping that question on its head. Instead of thinking about how to get people to a program we’ve already designed, what if we explore the various pathways of connection people have with our institutions, and create learning opportunities that capitalize on and enrich those connections? In asking that question, and revisiting it through the four years of the *Gesher* project, I ended up with a program that looked very different from what it might have been had I created it in a vacuum. The transformative learning experiences described in this profile, where teens grew from laggards to leaders, depended heavily on their sense of ownership in that process.

I also learned that participation in Jewish learning is not a choice a student makes once. It must be renewed at every step of the way. Here again, awareness of the various pathways through which individuals engage with the learning environment is critical. Fortunately, as I also learned during this project, different pathways of connection don’t need to come from separate programs. Even a small congregation, like the one profiled here, can engage its learners in multiple ways with a small number of programs, if its leadership pays attention to the various lenses through which participants view their involvement. When teens ask “Who else is going to be there?” or “What exactly is the point of this

21. Bryfman, *Generation Now*, 25.

program?” or “Will we get service credit for this?” what they’re really asking is “Is this going to be worth my time?” As we help them to answer these questions, we not only involve them in our programs, but begin to help them shape their own vision of their Jewish futures.

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