Wishing For More:
Jewish Boyhood, Identity and Community

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March 4, 2008

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Executive Summary

This research, based in the metropolitan Denver area, discovered teenage boys whose connections to Judaism and Jewish life offered them resiliency, constructive identities and relational opportunities for their development. The Jewishly-affirming young men in our sample described adaptations that were more independent of adolescent peer group norms and freer, especially in terms of masculine identities, with more expressive communication styles and close male friendships, than less Jewishly-connected boys.

For the most part, these boys were able to find their way to the Jewish community, fashioning a home for themselves by cobbling together their own particular mix of relationship, education, symbol and religious practice. However, their Jewish community did not make it easy for them to accomplish this outcome; on the contrary, most of the boys complained about the offerings available to them within organized Jewish institutions. From stale and dogmatic supplemental education, preachy youth outreach, anxious parents or overly secular youth groups, even the boys who were most Jewishly-affirming explained that they had had to construct their Jewish identities despite significant barriers.

This research further suggested that engaging in systematic inquiry with boys about their lives can help those interested in supporting them. We found boys who were quite open to talking about themselves, both in terms of their secular contexts and in relation to their religious and cultural identities. It was obvious to us that they were quite prepared to provide insight and answers to key questions. While this study was a response to specific concerns about Jewish boys – *"Where have all the young men gone?"* – by engaging our subjects in a more open-ended exploration of their lives and identities, we gained sufficient trust that they could trust us with stories about their lives. Drawn from a careful ear to these stories, this study begins to answer the many questions about boys' needs and hopes, with encouraging detail.

Thematic Findings

The prominent role of identity running through the boys' narratives about their lives was significant. At different times, in different situations, the **Jewish**, the **adolescent** and the **masculine** aspects of the participants' identities seemed more pronounced and influential in their choices. The following three major themes were described:

1. *"It was a home to me."* Throughout our meetings with boys, a sense of home, or "home base", "community", or "connection" was a resounding theme. Our sample contained boys who attended Jewish day school and those who often found themselves one of very few Jews in large public middle and high schools. What we could track across these and other social locations were the different degrees to which boys registered their need for a home and discovered strategies for fashioning and finding one, usually in some relation to their Jewish community.

2. *Self-development.* Overall, participants described an active, self-directed identity development. Most of the boys were making active, intentional choices about how and when to identify, connect and engage with their Judaism and/or Jewish identity. For the Jewishly-affirming boys, while it might have initially been their families who facilitated

their connections, at this point in their development they were now choosing to engage on their own terms, following a self-directed developmental logic. For some, they differentiated themselves from their more secular families and elected a different way of being in the world, one informed by their ties to other, usually Jewish, boys. They made it clear that they were making these identity moves on their own, that no adult could do it for them (though at times they cited adults who exposed them to new possibilities for Jewish identity). And many complained about youth group contexts that were too dominated by adults.

3. *Counter-cultural masculinity.* Many of the boys revealed unique perspectives on their masculine identities. Their masculinities stood in contrast to those in more mainstream cultures/social milieu (i.e., not trying to be cool, embracing academic achievement, the ability and desire to be affectionate, a value on being nice in general, including to younger boys, and how this all connects to emotional expressiveness and connections to their hearts). Across the more and less-affiliated groups, this contrast with mainstream masculinity was sharper and more visible the stronger the boy's affiliation with his Jewish culture. There was something that the more affiliated boys had - a nuanced self-understanding, a particular kind of maturity, an expressivity - that freed them up in a variety of ways and allowed them to explore and to experience who they are.

Implications for Programming

The import of these findings for organizations seeking to reach out to and program for boys can be summarized in the following points:

1. Affiliation: Among other things, this research on Jewish boys yielded a reconceptualization of our notions of affiliation, to one that allows for more fluidity and self-determination, to capture the realities of boys' connections. Keeping these realities in mind can influence how Jewish organizations interpret boys' shifting embrace of their Jewish identities.
2. Confidence and Pride: Given the important role Jewish experience plays in many adolescent boys' lives, community educators and youth workers can be more confident about the value of this experience. We are concerned that the worries and urgencies of educators and parents actually impel them to misread the opportunities with boys, to push when yielding works better and to rush forward when waiting would communicate more invitation.
3. A Remarkable Opportunity: Many boys evinced a longing for deeper Jewish connections. They wanted a place where they could talk about their lives, with others who could guide and understand them. In other words, there seemed to be a remarkable opportunity for the Jewish community to develop programs that can satisfy such boys' needs.
4. Boys' Agency: Both because they can ultimately be trusted and because they will, in reality, have it no other way, Jewish boys must be permitted to access opportunities for religious education and cultural on their own terms.
5. Partnerships with Boys: Programs for adolescent boys will best be established in ways that invite boys' hand in design and their full capacities in leadership.

6. A Role for Mentors: The boys were equally clear that they wanted, indeed needed, mentoring, particularly from younger adult males who can model the passage through to Jewish manhood.

7. Recognizing Boys' Actual Lives: The need for Jewish youth-serving institutions to fathom the realities of boys' lives is heightened, it seems to us, by the status accorded to Jewish masculinity as a subordinated and marginalized identity within the larger culture. Young Jewish males certainly perceive what the cost will be if they adopt the identities of their fathers and grandfathers. The developmental ramifications of this perception seem important to understand better.

8. Boys' Human Needs: Adults who hope to help Jewish boys must also evaluate their own ability to perceive their human needs, even as these are camouflaged, hidden or misplaced. Too many adult caregivers react to boys with feelings of rejection or blame, unable to penetrate boys' survival patterns to see the child needing connection, understanding and safety.

9. Boys' Need for Emotional Expression: What this means, in particular, is staying close enough, in good enough communication, that boys can express their hearts, especially when they cannot find sufficient safety to do so with their mainstream peers.

Suggestions for Future Research and Action

This research suggests three specific participatory action research-based initiatives for follow-up, which are:

1. *A Training Institute for Jewish Youth Workers*. We suggest gathering a small group of youth workers, from across a variety of contexts but all presently serving Jewish boys, to constitute a first cohort in a training institute focused on the developmental and social concerns of Jewish boys. Researched for outcomes, this action research pilot project would offer a substantive opportunity to explore qualities that work and that interfere with Jewish youth work.

2. *Boys as Co-Developers of Initiatives and Experiences*. The development, with a representative set of boys, of programming and experiences that are co-constructed and then studied in terms of their success reaching, engaging and retaining a wide range of Jewish boys over time, would be the thrust of this research-based program development project. The goal is for this program development process to be genuine, inductive and resonant for these boys and for a diverse range of Jewish boys. This kind of evidence-based, collaborative, youth-centered experience development is the real hope for engaging Jewish boys in meaningful events and experiences over time.

3. **Peer-to-Peer Dialogue Groups.** Specifically to explore the experience of boys' talking with each other about their lives, creating in such group dialogue a context on which they can depend for their self-development and emotional self-care, we suggest that a group (or several groups) of boys ages 15-18 be brought together on a regular basis to talk about their feelings, struggles, passions, needs and views of life. The ultimate result of such an action research process would be a greater understanding of how adults can help boys create conditions that allow them to share their experience as boys with each other.

Introduction

I have to laugh, because a Mom called me. Several of our boys, who have been together since kindergarten, were staying overnight and she said, 'Oh, my God!' She said, 'I was sitting in my home office and I could hear them through the heating vent.' And she was hearing the conversation they were having. And she said, 'Come over! You can't believe this!' And it was like, 'Wow!' And it made me realize boys need a place to do this. They were talking about sex and their own sexuality, about girls!' None of which they would talk about, the boys I know, with their parents. But they are relational. There aren't always societal places to express that.

It was one of those moments all who work with young people talk about, usually with great delight. Something revelatory had happened! In a most direct, natural and yet dramatic fashion, the boys in this mother's story were reminding her – not to mention those of us in the focus group with her - that social categories and stereotypes never really fit the human beings to whom they are applied. Though that thought would seem obvious, this mother's surprise was very real, because stereotypes about boys – their capacities and capabilities, their needs and limitations – are so deeply etched in the popular imagination. These boys, including her son, whom she clearly knew quite well, were discovered behaving in ways that are well outside of the bounds of conventional boyhood norms. Not only were they talking to each other, but they were talking about very personal matters, sex included! And they managed to do that without the assistance – or interference – of any adult.

This story and the many to follow in this report can help us to address misgivings we may harbor about boys. The study itself was a response to specific concerns about Jewish boys: *"Where have all the young men gone?"* Its findings, drawn from a careful listening to boys' stories, begin to answer this question, with encouraging detail. Up to this point, in the absence of a deep understanding of adolescent Jewish males, many have tended to agree with popular fears, that these boys are somehow indifferent to or unaffected by the resources, support and histories of their communities. But, fortunately, this study and its backers have found the time and capacity to question this conclusion: is it really true? Are Jewish boys, in fact, turning away because they find their religion or culture less than cool? Irrelevant to their lives? Are they actually finding better or more compelling clues elsewhere as they strive to become men? With this small qualitative study, we have engaged Jewish boys' help to interrogate and complicate such conclusions, hopefully in so doing making the larger point that it is hard to understand a group of people before listening well to them.

The bulk of this report is a summary and analysis of themes deduced from focus group conversations with boys, their parents and educators from the Denver Jewish community. But, before turning to our summary of key themes from these conversations, we first wish to contextualize the project within the framework of the research conversation well underway about adolescent religious identification, Jewish life and Jewish boyhood. Then, hoping to shed greater light on forces influencing Jewish boys' development, we will place that conversation within an even broader context, with a quick review of identity development theory and the growing field

of boyhood studies. Finally, after our summary of the boys' insights, we will return to some of these questions in terms of their implications for programming and future research.

Perspectives from Research

Jewish teenagers represent a distinct minority among American adolescents: in a national survey in which three quarters of 13-17 year olds claim to be Christian, 1.5% identified as Jewish. Compared to other groups included in their large *National Study of Youth and Religion,* Smith and Denton found Jewish teenagers to demonstrate a distinctive pattern in their religious behavior: they attend religious services less frequently and "pray" alone much less often, while fasting or practicing some other form of spiritual discipline twice as commonly (2005, pp. 51-53). On measures of youth group participation or religious group involvement, Jewish youth were found to be somewhat less actively observant than other groups.

In their excellent study of Jewish teens, based on a sample from Massachusetts, Kadushin, et al. (2000) found corroboration for the conclusions of Herring and Leffert (1997), who conducted a similar study in Minneapolis: American Jewish teens, while they "cared deeply about being Jewish and about Jewish causes", depart from the religious practices of earlier generations of immigrant Jews (p. 16). The American context, especially their parents' relative affluence and educational achievement, has shaped a Jewish adolescence that is more personal and individualistic, less communal and less observant in general. The research team concluded that respondents were unwilling to express their considerable feeling for their Jewish heritage in ways that "set them apart from a largely secular, pluralistic culture in which they are trying to "make it" (2000, p. 7). Being part of the American mainstream, in other words, trumped traditional cultural expectations for these youth.

As for the impact of gender on Jewish boys' religious connections, Smith and Denton found that the pattern paralleled what they saw across all of measures of religiosity: "teenage girls are a bit more religious than teenage boys", a finding consistent with patterns of adult religiosity. Differences of this magnitude in the religious experience of males and females have long been reported in gender studies, not surprising given gender's defining role in youth development and experience. As Prell wrote: "If jewishness is a gendered and relational concept, then Jewish men and women have not experienced their lives in identical ways" (1997, p. 80). Specifically among Jewish teens, Ravitch (2002) reported that boys and girls preferred different aspects of their participation in Jewish youth programming and synagogue supplementary schooling, arguing that "one size does not fit all". Her finding was echoed more generally by Charme (2006) and, with respect to Jewish men and women, by Habartal and Cohen (2001).

It is, however, exactly this gendered experience of boys that gives rise to concern on the part of religious and youth program leaders. Put simply, like male adolescents in all of the religions included in Smith and Denton's study, Jewish boys show up less often and drop out more dramatically. A particular sensitivity to Jewish "continuity" and assimilation, however, impels program leaders to seek better traction for their efforts with boys (Langman, 1999). Leffert and Herring (1998) found significant differences between boys and girls in terms of their involvement in Jewish activities, for example, and concluded, "adolescent males do not find the activities as meaningful as females do" (p. 59). In their study of JCC participants, Cohen, et al. (2007) report a similar gender differential. Even more illuminating was the finding by Kadushin, et al. that boys rejected Jewish supplemental education more "decisively" than girls (2000, p. v). Overall, in response to gender's effects on boys' connections to their community, Holtzman

captured the despair of many when he wrote: "The substance of Jewish traditions exists to add color to our lives, and without it too many young men will live in monochrome" (2003).

Worries about boys being somehow impeded in their development as males from full access to positive influences is a reasonable and timely thing, not particular to Jewish families, schools and religious institutions. The last decade has seen an encouraging rise of concern about developmental outcomes for boys. The nascent field of boyhood studies has painted a worrisome picture of the domination of boys' lives by restrictive notions of masculinity: "It is exclusive, anxiety-provoking, internally and hierarchically differentiated, brutal and violent" (Donaldson, 1993, p. 646). In many key developmental areas, well beyond spiritual development, boys are found to conform to an unhealthy masculine ideal. For example, in terms of basic health outcomes, Waldron (1976), the US Prevention Taskforce (1996) and Courtenay (2004) all found that their choices and lifestyle practices imperil males at far greater rates than females. Brooks and Silverstein (1995), Pleck and Sonnenstein (1992) and Pleck (1995) found, for example, that the greater the boy's conformity to narrow ideas about masculinity, the more likely he is to take risks related to alcohol use, drunk driving and drug abuse.

Similarly, in relation to mental health outcomes, O'Neil, et al. (1995) compiled stunning testimony over many years to the detrimental effects – in terms of self-esteem, depression, anxiety, violence, relationship success, etc. – of restrictive masculine norms. These damaging constraints take effect quite early in boys' lives, according to the work of Chu (2000), who studied elementary age boys and found them to be sensitive to the cultural demands of masculinity, making deliberate "compromises" in personal authenticity to avoid going against the grain of masculine norms.

Finally, and perhaps most problematic for society as a whole, a strong relationship exists between these same male norms and uncivil behavior. Boys far more commonly than girls engage in behaviors that increase the risk of disease, injury and death to themselves and others: they carry weapons more often, engage in physical fights more often, wear their seat belts less often, drive drunk more frequently, have more sexual partners as well as more unprotected sex, and use alcohol or drugs more often before sex (CDC, 2006). While there are those who want to hold boys themselves to blame for the choices they make in conforming to uncivil masculine norms, it is clear from research on moral development that how one relates to others is best understood as an example of "situated knowledge" (Lave and Wenger, 1999). With respect to moral behavior, where boys observe norms permitted by families, schools and communities – for example, for bullying and violence, risk-taking, competition, sexual objectification, etc. – they are most likely to follow suit.

How these insights about man-making can matter to youth program and religious leaders who hope to engage boys more successfully relates to the potential of religious-based connections to foster and support alternative masculine identities for Jewish boys. Youth identity, research teaches, is "co-constructed": between an individual's personal biography and the pressures and supports of his world, he charts his life course. Importantly, identity operates as a "steering mechanism" as youth guide their lives among many competing and confusing options (Ferrer-Wreder, et al, 2003, p. 601). In an overall adolescent context in which too many teens exhibit too many risky behaviors (Dryfoos, 1997), proponents of positive youth development

(Scales and Leffert, 1999) have highlighted the preventive power of positive youth identities. In their seminal review of youth development programs youth development researchers found, for example, that 11 of the 25 national programs studied "included a goal of fostering positive identity development" (Catalano, 1999). Many of the boys we met in this study, who relied upon their sense of community and prescriptive morality to forge principled, involved and expressive identities as men, emerged from what they have found possible – modeled, encouraged and supported - in their worlds. Conditions supporting such alternatives existed in their lives: it was that simple.

How can this encouraging finding be useful to Jewish programs hoping to promote boys' connections and their general well-being? Obviously, understanding how boys negotiate the masculine identity formation process – the peer pressures and incitements, the institutional norms, rewards and recognitional systems, the family and school tacit man-making curricula, the world of possibility as it typically exists for a boy – is a starting point. We can begin such a search for understanding with an ear to the stories of two groups of Jewish boys: those who find being Jewish significant and useful and those who, in the words of one informant, "don't see anything in Judaism they want to stick with". Both sets of stories help to illuminate boys' passage to manhood, with its constraints and its possibilities, and point toward openings where it might be possible to influence favorable outcomes for more boys. We can also benefit from the stories of the adults in boys lives – their mothers, fathers, religious and youth group leaders – who are presently on the front lines of these battles, to get some sense of how these care-givers' perceptions of boys' lives overlap with those of the boys themselves. We are hopeful that both the boys and the many who care for them can provide important insights for all who hope to build a better world.

Sample and Methods

As an exploratory, qualitative study, we were interested in authentic dialogue with and about boys, aiming to "hear" their stories; in this sense, precisely who we spoke with was less important than the conditions we could create in which interviewees could speak with us. To this end, the qualitative researcher adopts an "emic" approach (Lett, 2007), hoping that from "insiders" in boys' worlds (boys themselves, parents, teachers and religious leaders), they can capture the nature of their lived experiences. We adopted this approach for this study because we fundamentally believe that boys represent a population that is hard to "see" and "hear", except through the gauzy lens of our projections and distortions. From this initial study, we hope to map Jewish boys' worlds more faithfully, allowing for programming that is finer-gauged and more on target.

The validity (trustworthiness) of the qualitative project can be said to have five dimensions (Winter, 2000):

- Descriptive validity depends on the accuracy of the data gathering: how faithfully the research subjects' narratives are represented.
- Interpretative validity refers to the ability of the researcher to "respect the perspectives of the actors in the situation" (Maxwell, 1992, p. 290).
- Theoretical validity refers to the categories of analysis applied by the researchers, in this case their familiarity with boys' learning.
- Generalizability has to do with the relevance of the study's findings to members of the broader class and depends in many ways on the sample selected for study.
- Evaluative validity has to do with broader meanings offered by researchers, say, to schools generally working with boys.

Beyond these dimensions, another measure of a qualitative study's validity is the "authenticity" of its findings. According to Manning (1997), authenticity in qualitative inquiry represents a set of criteria committing researchers to very particular research practices. She lists five types of criteria: fairness, ontological, educative, catalytic and tactical. Fairness involves actions like 'member checking', which invites research participants to review researchers' interpretations. Of special importance for a project of this sort is what she terms "catalytic" authenticity: the degree to which the project and its findings "facilitate and stimulate" action (p. 108).

For our research sample, we arranged through a local organizer to gather together groups of Jewish boys, their parents and educators for semi-structured focus group interviews. Convenience sampling best describes the methodology used to construct the focus groups. As a consequence of the short timeframe to organize the study and the organizer's close connection to local Jewish networks, the sample was comprised predominantly of boys who are affiliated to the Jewish community through involvement in their synagogues, Jewish camps, Jewish youth organizations and/or other Jewish communal contacts. Though efforts were made to include boys who are more marginally connected, in the end there were only 4 who identified themselves as presently disconnected (and of these 4, only 2 had never affiliated). Overall, we conducted twelve focus group interviews with 41 boys. Of these, most (34) were presently members of synagogues. 27 of the boys were or had been youth group members, 22 had attended Jewish camp, 18 attended Jewish day school and 16 attended Hebrew high school. The average age of

the participants was 14.4, with two large groups of younger (6th and 7th graders) boys. In sum, this study was focused on boys who ranged from deeply committed (eg. boys in Jewish day school, youth leaders in Jewish community organizations) to boys who were less involved, though nonetheless Jewishly-affirming.

But despite the relative similarity in the Jewish involvement levels of our sample, our boys were quite varied across other important adolescent dimensions. Our groups included athletes (eg. wrestlers, basketball players, skiers and skateboarders) and intellectuals, extroverted leaders and more shy boys, ones who were quite active with girls and ones who were more inhibited. Within the range of Jewishly-connected boys, we were able to talk with boys who occupy quite different social positions in their schools and communities.

We also met with several groups of adults, to talk with them about their sons and students. We first met with a group of fathers at a youth group event focused on sports. Later, we met with a group of mothers. In addition, we met with a group of teachers – 2 men, 2 women – at a Jewish day school. Finally, we met with a group of religious leaders: rabbi's, confirmation class leaders, youth outreach coordinators. Overall, we met with 24 adults.

As previously stated, the protocol for the interviews was semi-structured, loosely following a set of open-ended questions intended to elicit critical features of their lives (e.g., home, school, neighborhood) and allowing room for them to tell stories as they might choose. Anonymity was assured and agreement was reached with participants to record the interviews, which were then transcribed and coded for theme by the study's investigators using an iterative coding process, with the first set of themes deduced separately and the second representing a synthesis of the previous two. In addition, the researchers' themes were explored in follow-up groups, including a final boys' group selected from previous groups; this "member check" process helped us to refine our conclusions and served to confirm the validity of our interpretations. From this analysis, the following summary themes were deduced, representing boys' perspectives, particularly on aspects of their lives related to their Jewish heritage. These themes offer important insights into the lives and needs of Jewish boys forging identities as males**.**

Findings

One of our global impressions was that the boys we met with were all quite busy building senses of self, drawing upon their various affiliations, opportunities and personal histories. Everyone had ideas about who he was and what that meant. Fashioned from their connections to their families and their friends, their claims to heritage, the feedback and social positions they experienced each day in school and abroad, these selves our boys were busy constructing were fundamentally important to their lives – now and for the future, as they embodied their aspirations and developmental trajectories. How to think of themselves, what they might hope to do, where to live, what risks they might be inclined to take, how confidently they can establish relationships: these and many other key questions were filtered through these teenagers' senses of self.

Of course, adults and caregivers hope that these constructed selves help to steel youth against the pressures, temptations and threats of adolescence. As Dryfoos (1997) established, too many teenagers get lost or run their lives right up to the edge, taking risks that endanger their well-being and opening themselves to experiences that can be overwhelming. Perhaps even more dismaying is the surrender many boys make – Chu terms it an "overcompromise" – to the tyranny of adolescent masculine norms. As we saw in our review of male outcomes in areas of health and mental health, such a surrender is not usually a good idea for boys. A boy's identity as a male – his "steering mechanism" – is thus critically important for guiding his choices and allowing for developmental possibilities.

From our interviews, we were struck by the prominent role of identity running through their narratives about their lives. At different times, in different situations, the **Jewish**, the **adolescent** and the **masculine** aspects of our participants' identities seemed more pronounced and influential in their choices. This reality of multiple identities, or multi-faceted selves, was not surprising to us; in complex societies, youth typically build identities by weaving together different strands of their personal biographies and social positions. Erickson (2004) has termed this multi-faceted personal experience "heteroglossia", drawing on Bakhtin's (1981) idea of "differing tongues". Erickson wrote:

> There is also heteroglossia within persons. Each person's life experiences differ somewhat from those of other people, and every person lives in a variety of social situations each day. Differing social situations provide differing ecologies of relationship with other people. They evoke differing aspects of the individual's overall repertoire of ways of speaking. (2004, p. 54).

The observation that all people draw from different parts of their histories and heritage, social positions and group memberships, depending on the relevance to present situations, certainly struck us as we were listening to Jewish adolescent boys in Denver. In the boys' stories, we heard this powerful mixing of others' voices and the ways in which the boys made choices about their own voices. We also heard their own strong, developing senses of self related to the stories they told us about their lives, their families and communities, their opportunities and their hopes for their future selves.

For example, one high school senior, reflecting on his journey as a Jewish boy, spoke of having been "more Jewish" at earlier periods of his life. Now, he said, he was conscious of

multiple commitments and of his Jewish connection being more attenuated. Perhaps by definition an adolescent should not be finally defined at all, much less by any single influence or affiliation. In fact, as we found, absent significant pressures for orthodoxy, Jewish boys in our study were heterodox, serving their own imaginations and their many interests/commitments as they explored developmental directions. Rather than privileging one aspect of our informants' identities over another, we found it more in accord with the actual complexity of their lives to describe each of these three dimensions, with key themes and illustrative comments from our conversations with parents, educators and, of course, boys themselves. Our goal is to make their stories as vivid and poignant as they were to us.

Theme One: "It was a home to me"

In one of our interviews with parents, we began by asking participants why they had come. They spoke, naturally enough, as much about their own hopes and lives as about their sons'. Halfway around the table, one mother explained that she had grown up in a small Midwestern town: rural, "hardly any Jews". She felt quite isolated: *"I really didn't have any Jewish friends",* she explained, and being Jewish came to be "embarrassing" to her. When she got to college, she discovered the campus Hillel – and telling us this part of her story, she began to cry. *"It was a home to me",* she explained simply.

Throughout our meetings with boys, this sense of home, or "home base", "community" or "connection", was a resounding theme. Our sample contained boys who attended Jewish day school and those who often found themselves one of very few Jews in large public middle and high schools. What we could track across these and other social locations were the different degrees to which boys registered their need for a home and discovered strategies for fashioning and finding one.

Most of the informants in our sample said that they gained greatly from their Jewish identities. While identity development is most commonly described deterministically, as something passed down in a set of traditions from preceding generations, these stories suggested a more complex mix of inheritance and appropriation, of personal meaning-making and intergenerational duty. Heritage and culture were reproduced and produced, learned and invented, in ways that had much to do with a boy's context, opportunity and imagination, just as multicultural theorists have postulated (Erickson, 2004). We could see in the cases of our informants that their sense of Jewishness was both learned and recreated, that they took pieces from their family experiences and histories, mixing that with their own experiences and what resonated for them as meaningful about Jewish identity. For some it was the religious aspects of Judaism; for others the social aspect. For still others, it was a sense of group pride and identity. For many, it was some complex and quite unique blending of all of these dimensions of Jewishness. Across all of the different boys in our sample, we heard an active meaning-making process, a self-conscious development of personal identities within spheres of influence that directly shaped boys' self-perceptions and ideas about their future selves.

Hall (1996) has detailed processes of ascription and avowal in social identity formation. Ascription refers to the attribution of qualities to an individual because of beliefs others have about their group; ascriptive processes are therefore based in inter-group relations and the identity categories formed and perpetuated through history. Avowal, on the other hand, refers to a process by which individuals declare their membership in specific identity categories. As it is lived day-to-day, social identity is best seen as a fluid and continual process, with shifting periods of avowal and ascription, across various categories of identity membership. Individuals typically prefer to define their identities for themselves, and to control how they are ascribed by others on the basis of qualities, behaviors, or speech; yet all are vulnerable to the "looking glass" of social relations and how we think we are regarded by others (Cooley, 1902; Pajares & Schunk, 2002).

This research project enabled us to meet with a number of boys who live in largely non-Jewish, secular worlds and yet chose to identify as Jews and to move towards a strong Jewish identity, despite the forces against such a psychological and social positioning. Some of these boys talked about Judaism or Jewish identity as a guiding force in their lives, something that provided an emotional, psychological and/or relational framework against which they measured their character and considered their choices. These boys often spoke about their Jewish identities as an act of public affirmation. Their stories compelled us to consider what it was about them as individuals, about their circumstances and about their exposure to Judaism and Jewish community life, leading to such choices. For some of these boys, claiming and constructing a Jewish identity was accomplished with outward, visible gestures or signs of being Jewish. Several who were minorities in their schools and neighborhoods, for example, decided to wear a *kippah* or Star of David necklace. Along the same lines, others chose to exclude themselves from mainstream activities and engagements in order to observe the Sabbath or Jewish holidays. The following examples helped us to learn more about Jewish boys' encounters with ascription and their consequent strategies for avowal, affiliation and making a home.

Public Jews

The choice to affiliate and identify with the Jewish community required that boys reckon themselves with a marginalized, and in some cases even derided, identity. As we heard of the projections made onto Jewish boys in schools and communities, we explored boys' responses. How did they make sense of their marginalization and ethnocultural anti-Semitism? How did these contexts frame their identities and choices? What we found was that, for a significant number of the boys, these encounters and experiences impressed upon them the need to affirm and even to strengthen their identities as Jewish boys, as Jews who care about the ways in which they represent themselves and engage in the world.

Sometimes, the ethnocultural attacks boys experienced were quite pronounced.

> *Someone told me that I had the curly hair of the devil one time, because I had a Jewish star on…He said, "You curly-haired devil, that star…", and something about the star around my neck.*

Other times, the boys seemed subject to a general ignorance of history on the part of their gentile classmates.

> *Like if I see someone drawing like, a swastika or something, that pisses me off, that pisses me off.*

(Interviewer: And have you seen that?)

> *Yes, yes, many times. And I go – well, first time the kid didn't know it was a swastika, he just thought it was a cool design, but then one kid was constantly drawing it on this white board, and I said, 'That's a Nazi symbol'. And he's like, 'I was replicating an image or something of a World War II something', and I was like, 'Don't do it, it's really sensitive', and so he stopped. But it's, I don't know, it can get offensive if they're just doing it. Like if they're saying like, 'I want to kill you because you're a Jew', like this*

one kid at my school – I got really offended by this – it's the only thing that really sets me off. Whenever we're talking about the Holocaust and Hitler, he says, 'Go Germany!' That really sets me off.

In the face of such cross-cultural confusion and anti-Semitism, some of the boys felt called upon to take a stand.

And we have a Jewish student club and we had latkes or whatever last week. It's kind of joked around the school. And you hear a bunch of jokes and stuff. I made it a point that whenever I hear one, I just make sure they know that it's not funny. And no matter how, you know, I might say, 'But that's really not that funny. That's not very nice.' And so they realize it's not funny, so it's kind of building within them that that's not explicitly tolerated.

For some of the boys, there was a sense of "representing" the Jewish world to the non-Jewish majority. As one boy stated,

Everybody is always judging everybody and I try to be as nice as possible, try for as many good deeds as possible. Because if somebody judges me as I'm being Jewish, I want to show them that a Jewish person's a kind, concerned person. And that's why I try to do as many good deeds as be as nice to everybody as possible.

And for others, there was a consciousness of being a minority, for example, in several of the public high schools where there were few Jews.

I think that we're different from other people because we're like a minority. It's very different, like you'll see Christians, like, they'll be more focused on themselves or, like, not focused on themselves but you'll see that they're more focused on, like, Christians.

Many boys chose, under these circumstances, to make public displays of their affiliation.

Well, I have a Star of David necklace that I wear.

(Interviewer: And do you wear that openly to display that you are a Jew?)

That, and to, like, I don't know. It's just comforting to…like, I see all these kids wearing, like, crosses and stuff. It's just, like, cool to be able to have my thing that I can go off and…Like on Hanukah, I wear a yarmulke.

We heard several stories of boys who embraced their role as "The Jew" in their predominantly non-Jewish schools, deliberately wearing a star or a *kippah* to proclaim their identity. In addition to such public stands, boys also spoke of a broader sense of duty, of carrying Jewish history.

Just the fact that it's kind of our burden to keep our people alive and to keep our traditions alive and our culture alive. [I feel] a responsibility that I want.

Like a lot of kids at our school, the other three Jews, they don't practice. I know one does but the other ones don't really do all that much. I think it's cool to know what it is. I like to be involved in everything.

I think a commitment to the Jewish community, and my part in the Jewish community, to help make it stronger, and to always be there, because I think that the Jewish community is a very valuable thing in my life, and it teaches good ethics and morals to live by.

Friendships

Boys also expressed their desire for a deeper Jewish identity by seeking out and cultivating friendships with Jewish peers. Many made a clear distinction between their Jewish and non-Jewish peers, stating that they felt that their friendships with other Jews felt "safer", more "lifelong" and more substantive in terms of the kinds of topics and the quality of interaction. These boys drew their Jewish friends around them in the same way they wore their stars and *kippah*, or interrupted anti-Semitic remarks: it was simply their active avowal of a Jewish identity and all that comes with it. As the one boy put it regarding his star, "It's just comforting".

I've definitely had some very close friends that weren't Jewish and I still have contacts with people that aren't Jewish, but my closest friends are probably Jewish and they're certainly (in my Jewish youth group).

My parents always taught me that you'd always have friends when you grew up, and you'd have people you called your friends, but the only friends that would really be there for life would be your Jewish friends.

(Interviewer, to another boy: Have you singled out Jews to be friends with, the way Z. has?)

Actually, kind of. I mean, yeah, I guess. I mean, not actually by choice, it just happened that way, I guess. Just because we're Jewish, we're friends. It wasn't that I was trying to be friends with them because they're Jewish. It just happens that a lot of my best friends are Jewish, just because that's how it worked out. Honestly, I guess we just have things in common. I think, that we're Jewish.

I like to be around Jewish people. I don't have a lot of Jews at my school.

Israel

Similarly, some boys found in a strong connection to Israel a primary touchstone for their lives and sense of Jewish identity. For these boys, identities as Jewish American boys were deepened by a commitment to another place, Israel. Their connection to Israel had a quality of idealization of Israel as a spiritual, intellectual and psychological homeland. While one of the

boys had intensive exposure to Israel because his family owns real estate there, other boys had only been there once and yet claimed identities informed by strong Zionist orientations.

> *Ever since I was young I've been to Israel. I have gained a love for Israel as many times I've been. It's an unexplained feeling basically.*

> *I would just like to say that I also have a very strong connection with Israel. A lot of my family lives there. It's kind of also the same feeling that he has. A real connection with it and stuff… Just like a second home as in physically and almost a first home spiritually.*

> *I went to Israel two summers ago, with (camp in PA). I went there and it was great, because we had great discussions. And our counselors were just great. And I think that was a really, really awesome experience. I think that comes with   being in Israel and I think that can't be imitated on a Sunday once a month, whatever.*

A Personal Respite

As a complement to their public avowal, in the face of so much attribution and cross-cultural misunderstanding, many of our informants found being with others like them, other Jewish boys, to be a "relief." If we accept the notion, following Lacan (1977), of a human need for completion in the social gaze of others, it makes sense that these boys would turn to each other for relief from the "mis-recognition" of their gentile peers.

> Everyone is misrecognized within society, according to Lacan. Psychic agency in response to this phenomenon of misrecognition is indefatigable and personally dynamic; we seek out the Other's gaze in a multiplicity of locations…(Mann, 1994, p. 84).

Or, as one of our informants put it,

> *It's nice to be with people like you.*

Others elaborated on the same sentiment.

> *I think there is a safety to it. I think that like, I don't know. Yeah, I definitely think you feel safe because like nobody's going to be like, 'Oh, you're Jewish!' Like, I don't know.*

> *I think the main, it's being with people who are like you and that common trait is Judaism, that common denominator for everybody is that we're Jewish, regardless of where we go to school, where we're from, where we were born, the languages we speak, what we do in school, how we do in school. It's just the common denominator that we're Jewish.*

> *I think he's absolutely right. Like, the whole like, when you're around Jews, you're not 'The Jew!' That's a big deal.*

(Interviewer: Say more.)

I don't know. Well I guess like, I go to a school where I am like 'The Jew' on campus. There's like five, ten of us maybe, and so, you know, you get a reputation. And, so from there on out, everybody knows you as 'The Jew', you're 'The Jewish kid'. Whereas like, I'm in a room like this where like everybody here's Jewish, I'm not 'The Jew' anymore.

Connection and Human Understanding

But, more than simply being safe from the scrutiny of the majority, our informants said that they longed for the common value system, the familiar culture and the capacity for understanding they found possible when they were with other Jewish youth. One boy explained,

I guess I just think of myself in that I'm Jewish and I just think, you know, 'All these people are Jewish so they're not that different. They'll be able to understand'.

The boys were quite articulate and even profound about this aspect of their need for each other. We were moved by their stories of a search for "recognition", relationships in which they could feel "heard" and tell that they were "seen". We witnessed two boys, for example, who had not known each other before we placed them in a focus group together, find understanding and compassion with each other, based simply on the assumptions they were able to make about each other.

It's the fact that I can relate to him on some level already. It's like there's some connection, there's some bridge, that we already have with each other, just because I know he's here tonight, I know he's Jewish. I know that there's some connection.

As we pointed out to them what we were observing of their connection, they were able to expound further.

If they would define themselves as Jewish, then that's already enough to view them as me. I mean, to view them as they're like me. See, I wouldn't sit down right here and tell him my whole life story, just because somebody's Jewish. But I think I would be more inclined to get to know them more and be able to talk about these things, these kinds of things, a lot more quickly. Just because I think they'd be able to maybe relate more. I think they'll be able to understand more. Understand and feel, I guess.

There's a level of understanding from Jew to Jew that exists. There's a level of understanding that makes you connected, whether it's the holidays, whether it's your belief system, whether its' your family values, whether its your ethics, your morals, what you live your life by. There's definitely connections that you form there.

I don't think it's as much, like, people going to Judaism as some place for them to be put into sort of a category. But I think it's like the root of everything that, like, makes us human. It helps us bond together, so we can kind of better understand each other.

Other boys commented on the same experience and touted it as the veritable basis for Jewish youth programming.

It's the level of understanding. It's just, if you promote to people: 'Come and be around people that you'll immediately feel connected with. Give this a try! You'll immediately have some understanding.'

I like participating in our youth group, because everyone is really cool and we're all, like, Jewish and we can talk about the same stuff, and we can relate to each other and it's just really fun.

You have stuff in common with, like, people at school and all that stuff, but you're not, like, totally interacting with them. You don't totally know them. They could be totally different people than you. When you go to temple, the first time I went, I had so much fun. I didn't know anyone there. And it was cool because, Like, I think we're all raised on the same values, like 'Don't steal'. Even if it's not like the same real detailed values, it's still the same, you're raised the same way generally. That kind of all connects you. Like you may go into it thinking that you won't, but you'll like the people around you, because you just have this natural connection with them.

"It's community and that's why I think the main – this is just my opinion, you'll take your conclusions – but that it's being with people who are like you and that common trait is Judaism, that common denominator for everybody is that we're Jewish regardless of where we go to school, where we're from, where we were born, the languages we speak, what we do in school, how we do in school. It's just the common denominator that we're Jewish and that building that Jewish identity for kids who are younger than us now, for the most part, kids A's age, it's a Jewish identity that I think is really important to get cultivated that they have a sense that it's not just bubbling Judaism on a little Scantron. Religion: Judaism or Jewish. That it's a little something more.

Wishing for More

In light of how deeply these boys yearned for contact with others like them, many spoke of wishing for more opportunities than they presently could find. There was a distinct feeling that there were too few good institutional opportunities to be with other Jewish boys. Whether it was that the opportunities were too religious, or insufficiently "Jewish", boys felt that they struggled to forge their connections and build Jewish identities despite this rather limited opportunity structure. Several of their comments showed their awareness of the very post-Bar Mitzvah gap motivating our study.

I think it's kind of interesting that we sometimes talk about assimilation, but we talk about assimilation in like, 'Do you marry a Jew?', or, "Do you marry a non-Jew?". But I think that in society today we're dealing with a completely separate type of assimilation, for kids in their teenage years, for Jewish kids in their teenage years. The lack of programs or the lack of some entity that's there to keep those kids connected to their Judaism is why they assimilate then.

There's this gap, from like your middle school and high schools years, where there's really nothing strong. And there are youth groups and things, but they're honestly pretty weak and they don't keep kids connected.

There's not enough of it. I think they need to increase the opportunities.

I think you start at 7ᵗʰ grade. You don't have to do 6ᵗʰ grade but definitely those later years make so much more if a difference. You don't have any of those programs and you need to talk about this stuff and there's no group.

At my age, I'm so more curious and like, interested, in my religion and what to know, what I want to learn about it. But there's no program to teach me that. And they only teach it to the younger kids.

This sentiment was certainly echoed by many of the adults we spoke to, reflecting on their own lives as adolescents and on the lives of the boys they now care for. This overlap was one clear area where boys' perceptions matched adult understanding.

I'm five years from being in high school and there was nothing for me when I was growing up. So I really know what it's like to be a boy and growing up in this community. And there wasn't anything. I worked at Hillel at Arizona State last year and most of the boys that came, most of the men that came, were lost. They didn't know what their role is in the Jewish community or in society in general. You kind of have to fit inside of a box and to fit in, you have to drink or you have to be macho, or you have to…so, they're lost.

I would like my boys to be able to connect with their Judaism as a source of inspiration and strength for hem when things might get hard for them. I want my children to know that there's always a community there for them and a community that would care for them.

I wish he had found some Jewish friendships, like a Jewish home. He went through religious school, hated every minute of it. Hated it. He tried (youth group); hated it. He came back and was confirmed. That was little bit of a struggle. Like I said, he's a very strong Jew, but he doesn't have a Jewish community

Theme Two: Self-Development

In the evening of our first visit to Denver, we met with a group of high school-aged youth at the local JCC. The conversation went well: the boys turned out to be an especially Jewishly committed group of teenagers, some attending Hebrew high school, others active on youth boards of local Jewish philanthropies and community groups. After hearing from them about their principled embrace of Jewish identities, we asked about other Jewish boys they knew, ones who did not align as they had. Two aspects of their responses were significant. The first was their acknowledgement that this was a large group, perhaps the majority of Jewish adolescents in their schools. The second was their flat-out reluctance to judge or condemn these teens, who, as they explained, "don't see anything in Judaism that they want to stick with". We pushed them further, however, to say what they actually thought about such boys' decisions not to connect with their Jewish community, and one of the boys finally declared, *"There's reasons why you would or wouldn't do something. It's a matter of if you want it. Like, if you want it, then you need it."*

In this response, we heard a fundamental insight into both the boys who affirm their Jewish identities and those who are more marginally connected. Essentially, this young man had informed us about how those boys who find a Jewish "spark" – nurtured by their families, their histories, the accessibility of rich community resources like Hebrew high school or BBYO youth groups, or as a result of their own determined effort – actively shape their lives in relation to it, adopting identities that are powerfully influenced by alternative ideas about service, hierarchy, social justice, and masculinity. This particular young man, for example, explained that he had had to delay getting a black belt in his martial art because he would not attend Friday night practices sessions; the sacrifice was painful but necessary, in his view, for the kind of man he had decided to be. Referring with some wistfulness to the less-affiliated boys, he offered, *"I sometimes think just the way they do. I don't completely enjoy fasting on Yom Kippur or sitting in shul all day, I would much rather be out with my friends."* But he had realized something about his own fundamental sense of himself and would follow where that sense took him, however inconvenient or uncomfortable.

In the same way, however, other boys might "want/need" to make other choices. Overall, what our informants described for us was the active, self-directed nature of boys' identity development. This boy seemed to be saying, in response to our questions, that each teen finds his own rationale – his "want" – for connecting to the Jewish community and then drives his day-to-day choices – his "need" - accordingly. Our informant was loathe to judge the choices of other Jewish boys: they simply didn't "want" their Jewishness in the same way. In the course of our meetings, we realized that most of our informants were also making active, intentional choices about how and when to identify, connect and engage with their Judaism and/or Jewish identity. For the Jewishly-affirming boys, while it might have initially been their families who facilitated their connections, at this point in their development they were now choosing to engage on their own terms, following a self-directed developmental logic. For some, they differentiated themselves from their more secular families and elected a different way of being in the world, one informed by their ties to other, usually Jewish, boys. In their conversations with us, they made it clear that they were making these identity moves on their own, that no adult could do it

for them (though at times they cited adults who exposed them to new possibilities for Jewish identity). And many complained about youth group contexts that were too dominated by adults.

A corollary, then, to the heteroglossia characterizing our Jewish adolescent boys was the intentional - or "ontogenetic" – nature of their identity development.

> In the course of their ontogeny, individuals form mental representations of what they can or should become, and these representations feed into the ways in which they interpret, organize, and evaluate their actual and future development. (Brandtstadter, 1999, p. 38).

Our informants' stories were compelling on this point: however anxiously adults and others around them conveyed their hopes for Jewish continuity, most of the boys we spoke with were clear about their right to choose their own affiliations and identities. Some, in fact, chose to be "more Jewish" than their families, some even chafed at the "watered-down Judaism" in their youth outreach organizations, wanting to learn more about their history and religion. But many also spoke of their escape from the confining rigors and dogma of religious education or the overzealous control of hopeful parents. One boy, a senior in high school whose mother was very involved in Jewish youth work, captured this theme well, explaining how he had fell out of the Jewish orbit after Bar Mitzvah.

> *I was more Jewish than I am now. And I think that's because of Hebrew school and my parents pushing me to go. And then, once I got Bar Mitzvah'ed, I did Hebrew High but it was too far away and wasn't worth it. So, we kind of dropped off the face of the Jewish youth planet. If I wanted to be, if I wanted to go to Hebrew High or to BBYO, my parents would let me. I just never felt the urge to go, compelled to. And now, it's just being Jewish is just being Jewish. I feel like I'm more things more than I'm Jewish, you know? Do you understand what I am saying? I was thinking about what I am more than I am Jewish, but I couldn't think of anything. But I'm not particularly Jewish. I'm a skier. I wouldn't put skiing ahead of Jewish, Judaism, but I think it's…I don't think it's at the top, because I don't think being Jewish is what defines me.*

What the ontogenetic perspective offers is a way to understand this adolescent's obvious reaction to pressures of his family and culture that he become "more Jewish". Writing about the role of culture in human development, to organize "the acquisition of cultural tools and techniques" by individuals, Brandtstadter explains:

> Within this field of affordances and constraints, an individual selects and shapes his or her own developmental ecology, thereby gradually creating a "personal culture" (Heidmets, 1985) that reflects the individualized way in which the developing person negotiates cultural demands and expectancies (1999, p. 41).

Our second key theme, then, was this insight that boys were in charge of their identity acquisition, following their hopes and dreams in directions they were, for the most part, often fully conscious of.

Active Exploration

The boys were clear with us, above all, that much of what adults had been trying to do

for them misunderstood this fundamental fact about adolescent development. Many of the boys seemed to feel that the static and rigid expectations of their Jewish community often missed the mark precisely because they failed to account for young people's need to explore. As one boy explained, when we pressed him to be more explicit about what Jewish boys might need from their youth-serving organizations, the "target" is far from stationary or even discernible in a generalized way.

> *It's hard to say this is what Jewish boys that are this age are looking for in their Judaism.*

Another acknowledged the difficulty for those planning teen opportunities, while still being clear that theirs' was an intentional search:

> *It's like the grass is always greener on the other side. Like, I don't want to learn it then, then you don't want to learn it. But, eventually, I think through confirmation but like right now it's like I think, you all… there's a certain age where you're receptive to certain things. Like at this age now, we're receptive to certain things. We're receptive to social skills, how to become cooler, how to dress cool (not really). But like I think when we're younger we're more receptive to color, more receptive to other things, stories and learning how to do new things. And at this age we want to dig more and learn more about things. We need a deeper meaning. And I think later on in life that continues more on a deeper level.*

Or, another boy, who spoke about the great majority of his peers who simply "didn't know":

> *There's a spectrum of people out there, a spectrum of teens. There's people very far on the side of, 'Yeah, I want to be involved in Jewish organizations', and they're out there actively looking for the one that fits them. And then, there's that other group, on the other side, that says, 'I don't want this at all.' And their heels are in the ground and they're not going to go anywhere and they don't want to be part of it. But the biggest group is right in the middle. It's that group of, 'Well, I don't know. Show me and if I like it, I'll stay.' It's hard, because I don't think we necessarily know what we're looking for.*

Yet another boy, acknowledging his own vacillation, drew our attention to the obvious fact that adolescents are supposed to try different things out. He was quite unapologetic for his experimentation.

> *I try different things and I'm just experimenting to see what I like and what I do not like.*

The pressured, or at least observed, nature of their identity choices mostly left the boys we spoke with unfazed. The level of the anxiety and hope we encountered in our adult groups was not perceptible among the boys. They were focused more immediately and contextually.

> *[Affiliation]…it all depends on the person and it's not just you buy it or you don't. I think it's more along the lines of what the person chooses on their own.*

There were, thus, stories adults would have found disconcerting and stories they would have found deeply satisfying and reassuring. One sincere boy, for example, who actively sought a connection to Judaism that extended far beyond what his family had desired, put it quite thoughtfully. As he explained what he was doing by attending Hebrew high school, seeking to learn more about his religion and culture, he said:

> *I think it's a way to redefine yourself, you could say. You could say, you know, you can redefine yourself almost. You can find yourself.*

Or, another story told by a parent, underscored this observation that many boys would find their way to what they needed. These stories stood as testimony that teenagers, even males, can be counted on to develop their identities by drawing on resources of connection, personal narrative and heritage. In this story, a mother told the group of other parents where her son was while she met with us in the focus group:

> *Joey and one of his buddies, one of the Jew gang, are talking today because they said they're planning a boys' event. They just decided that they needed to do something for just the boys. And so the boys are planning it, they're doing it. They got lots of support for it, which I thought was very cool. So I said, 'Joey, what are you doing?' He said, 'Well, first of all, we're going to watch an action movie'. I said, 'Okay. That sounds really good. Then what are you going to do?' He goes, 'Well, we'll probably talk'. I said, 'Really! Well, what kind of things do you talk about'? I don't remember how he said it, but it was funny, because he said, 'You know, relationships and sex'. And I said, 'Really? You're talking about that with your Jewish friends!' He goes, 'Well, yeah, because, we kind of take the Jewish take on it'. Wow! That's kind of cool!*

Youth-Centered Opportunities

Just as our informants – boys, as well as the adults close to them - were clear that they were engaged in their own self-development, they were also insistent about the role of those adults who sought to help them with their identities and their connections to their Jewish heritage.

> *I think the more the parents are involved in this, the less it's going to happen for the kids.*

> *I think if I was more educated at, less preached at, then I would be more likely to become more religious.*

> *The kids need to run the organization. And, in terms of running it, they need to be the ones that dictate what happens and what they want. And I think that's probably the most important thing, is that kids don't want a group of adults that come to them and tell them what they should be doing.*

Some of the boys were quite animated as they related experiences with Jewish organizations or Jewish education that had not worked for them. One young man, for example, who seemed to be involved with just about every youth opportunity in the Denver area, talked about his frustration

trying to work with the staff of the organization on whose youth board he served.

> *Top down is bad. Top down is always bad. The kids want to run the organization from the ground up.*

Another, even though he had identified himself as not particularly affiliated, explained why he had been willing to attend a Sunday evening focus group.

> *I'm here because I feel there's a lot to be said about this topic. I think that there's a very particular way that a group has to be run in order for teen guys to go. I feel like it has to be more of a community, friends, with a little bit of Judaism, than an overload of Judaism.*

In the same group of relatively less affiliated teens, another boy offered helpful advice on the subject of making youth outreach more accessible, essentially echoing what almost all our informants had said: that the occasions needed to appeal to boys' interests.

> *You need a fish hook; you need some bait. I feel like you need a little bait to reel you in, instead of, let's say the headline was, 'A teen talk about Jewish traditions with a basketball game'. I feel that your Mom or your Dad would just push you in. But if it was, 'Let's go play ice hockey and talk about Judaism', I think that kind of puts the teen to be motivated.*

Another comment, along the same lines:

> *You have to have the focus to get people in the door. It would have to be geared towards something active and social as opposed to something down and philosophical. And I think it's about creating a fun experience. On the drive home when their Mom picks them up, they're going to be like, 'I had a good time. This was fun for me'.*

Even though our informants felt that many adults misunderstood the intentional nature of their identity development, the boys' needs seemed better understood by adults than they seemed to appreciate, judging by the insightful comments of educators and religious leaders in our focus groups. We heard many echoes of the boys' advice.

> *I guess our goal is to make sure there is that point of entry. You know, what we do for a living is we provide the portals and we try to encourage the entry and the immersion.*

> *I think kids go where kids go and I think that has to be our starting point. Certainly, if go where boys are already going, that's the first catalyst: 'So and so's going, come with us. How come you're not going? We're all going'. Those boys, I think, feel a certain unstated comfort or a deep recognition that in the other one who is Jewish, no matter what his background, is that there's got to be some commonality in their being Jewish.*

> *There's really two levels of Jewish culture: There's a surface level, which we might argue is the more important level, because that's the way that people feel comfortable*

entering and getting onboard and involved. And there's a subculture or there's an elite culture of those, who are willing to take on more commitment and observance.

Do we want to get them involved in our agendas or do we want to understand their agendas? I think that the agenda that young men have in the world, I think how they express that themselves and how they show their agendas today are radically different than that of any of our institutions…But they're real issues that have to do with core masculinity issues of a boy, at whatever age they are, that the Jewish community – and not just picking on us, you could pick on any faith community – has largely ignored.

And we heard similar awareness on the part of parents we met with. For example, when they were speaking of how to construct opportunities for their sons, these parents recognized the limitations of their own roles.

I think the leader is crucial. I think it has to be someone that the students, the kids, are saying, 'Oh, I want to hang out with Bobby', the leader, whoever. And I was thinking a college kid or someone of that age range would be best, because I think at our age we kind of look up to them in that: a mentor.

But I think for people who are younger, it's a lot easier to open up and talk, to get motivated, I think, to come back, if you're hanging out with some cool college kid who's taking his time on a Sunday or whatever, instead of heading to the slopes or watching the Broncos, to hang out with you.

Theme Three: Counter-cultural Masculinity

In addition to their powerful avowal of Jewish identities and the obvious intentionality of their developmental choices, many of our informants revealed unique perspectives on their masculine identities. Many evidenced masculinities that stood in contrast to those in more mainstream cultures/social milieu (i.e., not trying to be cool, embracing academic achievement, the ability and desire to be affectionate, a value on being nice in general, including to younger boys, and how this all connects to emotional expressiveness and connections to their hearts). And it seemed to us, across the more and less-affiliated groups, that this contrast with mainstream masculinity was sharper and more visible the stronger the boy's affiliation with his Jewish culture. There was something that the more affiliated boys had - a nuanced self-understanding, a particular kind of maturity, an expressivity - that freed them up in a variety of ways and allowed them to explore and to experience who they are.

Kimmel (1996) and many others (e.g., Gilmore, 1990) have made the point that even though a very particular brand of masculinity may dominate public discourse in a particular society, it is never the only brand. There are always subordinated and marginalized masculine possibilities co-existing along with the dominant brand. In fact, alternatives constantly arise anew, as young people seek to invent better lives. But, through the entrenchment of a preferred ideal in mainstream social institutions – schools, media, families and communities – these alternatives get little play and, in fact, can become signals for peer policing and other reliable mechanisms for maintenance of the status quo. At the very least, the reward and recognitional systems operating around children have evolved with a bias in favor of the familiar and safe, even despite the profound and conscious concerns of those adults who manage them. The educational theorist, Dale (1982), wrote about this tendency for entrenched ideas to prevail in institutions (in his example, schools):

> Hegemony is not so much about winning approval for the status quo, winning consent for it or
> even acceptance of it. Rather what seems to be involved is the prevention of rejection, opposition
> or alternatives to the status quo through denying the use of the school for such purposes (p. 156-157).

In the case of our Jewish boys, their experience as males had already made clear to them that their way of being male was not "popular". Like all males who try out masculine identities that deviate from the dominant ideal, in fact, they were quite conscious of their marginal and subordinate status. The position of Jewish masculinity in the larger society's contest among competing masculine ideals has been the subject of some study. Brod (1988; 1994; 1998), most notably, has written of the marginalization of this brand of masculinity, which he terms a "culture of resistance", and the internalization by Jewish males of its targeted, derogated status. In an essay about two Jewish writers' creation of Superman and his real life alter ego, Clark Kent, he writes:

> Clark is a sort of quintessential characterization of the Jewish *nebbish.* He's a quasi-intellectual. He's
> a writer; he wears glasses; he's inept, timid, and cowardly; and he is described as mouselike (1998, p. 47).

Brod, in fact, worries that Jewish masculinity, which he and others (e.g., Breitman, 1988) see as emerging logically from Talmudic texts and rabbinic traditions, sets Jewish males up for attack by unconscious forces in the society. The association of Jewish manhood with "sensitivity", for

example, equates it with stereotypic images of gay masculinity and creates pressure, especially for adolescent males, to overcome such stereotypes.

> Pressures of Jewish men to be "one of the boys" on the terms of the hegemonic culture lead them to deny their own cultural traditions and seek power vis-a-vis other men and vis-a-vis "their" women by seeking to conform to dominant norms (Brod, 1994, p. 92).

With this context in mind we were therefore impressed by the strength and self-possessed confidence of many of the Jewish boys we met. Among our groups, there was a heartening vigor to the expression of counter-cultural norms for being male on the part of most participants. For example, these Jewish boys seemed relatively free to sample many different possibilities from life's palette: wrestler, scholar, artist - all seemed equally available as identity options for them. Their social positions, in fact, seemed secondary to the more central decision to relate to the world as *mensch* (even as they were somewhat uncomfortable with the term). As we questioned them about different aspects of their masculinity, they detailed a set of characteristics in contrast to those of the mainstream ideal-type. We heard no particular apology or evidence of pressured choices; these were young men living rather comfortably within freely-elected, masculine identities.

Different, Not Deficient

As we said, the boys themselves were aware of their status among their peers. What was so striking was their confidence that it was their choice - not their fault – that they were not the most popular boys on campus. The masculinities that they adopted were often premised on values – for example, treating other people with kindness and respect – that set them apart from the "cool" boys in the high school hierarchy. We queried them about their difference from the mainstream.

(Interviewer: Are you the 'popular kids'?)

Just about the furthest from it. I just don't identify with them. Like, I see them as, kind of, the beer-drinking bozos of the school, you know. They're also the kind of kids that I have seen as like, they don't even really realize the implications of, like, them saying things. Like, there's a kid, actually one of my friends, they call him 'Toucan Dan', like, because he kind of has, like, what you would call a Jewish nose.

I mean, there are definitely a lot of people who think that I'm cool, there are people who think that I am very weird, and sort of like, stray away, and then there are the typical cool people who just sort of try and make fun of me, and try and bring me down, and I just walk by, and they're like, what the heck?

I wouldn't say that, like, we couldn't be the most popular kids in our school, because there are, there's this one guy who's Jewish and he's pretty popular. I don't necessarily say we couldn't be. It's just that we don't want to be.

Well, I think that at my school I'm…at my school there's like five groups of kids and it all goes in order. I'm generally like the floater between all the groups. I'll hang out with

some of like real nerdy kids, my group that I want to hang out with. Sometimes I'll hang out with the popular kids because the girl will be cool. And then I think I'm the only one who's really at my school, me and another Jewish kid, are the only people that are willing to stand up to the group. Like certain people will stand up to be cool, but I'll fight for people.

As we heard, there was a conscious sense of choosing to be different, to value a different standard. These boys' comments were expressly about their alternative values.

Well I think I'm not the typical adolescent because, one… I take Judaism seriously and a lot of adolescents don't take the religion seriously as much as they would. [Interviewer: Do adolescents take anything seriously?] I think there are some things. Football or video games. Nothing important, nothing that is as important as something that's going to stay with you for the rest of your life. And I don't think as many adolescents focus as much on their religion or on extending their focus on the religion as much as I do… And I think I'm, also different because I enjoy going to school mostly.

I guess that I'd say that I'm different. When I'm around my friends, especially some of my friends who love football, love video games and things like that. I mean I also like it, but it's not really as big a part of my life.

All the kids that are popular are not the nicest kids. I don't want to be their friend.

No, I'm different. A lot of our wrestlers are really…they think so much of themselves. Everybody thinks a lot of themselves, a lot of our jocks. I'm more laid back. I could care less if I was on varsity or JV.

Being "Serious"

Among the values guiding these boys' masculine identities was a commitment to taking themselves and their lives "seriously", in the sense that they seemed to believe that they had a social significance, a role in the world: to make a contribution.

Everything we do has to do with, like, just things that you would normally do just to be, like, a good human being.

(Being a) Mensch is just being a good person. Like, if I'm going over to a friend's house, I'll always call them up…just do something cool, like pick up a drink while I'm on my way, you know? Just the little stuff, like holding doors or waiting for your friend outside, or anything like that. It's going the extra mile to be a friend. There is the small steps you can take. There's also, every year I volunteer at some kind of Jewish camp. One year, it was our shul's Hebrew day school camp here in the summer, and last year I worked as a CIT at the JCC. I mean, I donate money and it really is just a value that I want to keep, just, trying to do tikkun olam, repairing the world.

The youth groups and summer camps give us that opportunity to fulfill that, like, being Jewish. Like, the last thing I did with my youth group was we made tacos for about 150

homeless people. It just, like, let's you do what it, let's you be a good, Jewish person, by doing what you're supposed to do. They give you an opportunity to do that.

It's because of where he's been brought up and, just, his whole environment. It becomes automatic to him. Like, he doesn't even question, like, the fact of helping someone else. It's just the way he was raised and the way he was brought up to do these things. Like, it's just kind of this quality of, just the way that we do things. Like, we're very community-oriented.

One consequence of this sense of purpose was that these boys tended to talk more substantively about their lives and about the world with each other than they could with non-Jewish peers. Many of the boys we interviewed spoke about their ability (and desire) to talk about "serious things" with their Jewish friends and in Jewish social and educational contexts. They clearly valued and sought out these opportunities, framing them as outside of many of their more typical interactions with non-Jewish peers.

With the masses at (local high school), I mean, you just can't talk to them about serious things.

But with, like, my friends who aren't Jewish, things like, the personal things like family, family stuff going on, or other stuff in your personal life, it's harder to talk about it with those guys than it is to talk about with these guys.

It's just a really comfortable place. You don't feel like, if you say something and people disagree with it, they're going to think about you differently or they're going to, like, beat you up.

I think part of the reason why it works better with (youth group) or whatever is because like we can all hang out, and know that we're coming together as a Jewish group, and really being able to express whatever we want, and knowing that like we're not going to be judged on that angle.

Less Homophobic Norms

The participants in this study seemed generally less prone to making fun of each other and, it seemed, less constricted by homophobic norms. Our informants described, for example, the typically dampening effect of these norms on conversations among their non-Jewish friends. They told these stories to make the point that they found much more freedom in Jewish male contexts.

Guys have the stereotype of not being able to express their emotions or anything like that, and there's a general homophobia about expressing emotion. And, I think honestly at (local high school), there's a pretty massive homophobia. And, at (local Jewish youth groups), I don't think that really exists. Like, we can be comfortable with ourselves and still talk to each other and not, like, have an issue.

Yeah, because there's nobody – 'Oh, you're gay, you talk to each other!' – like, it just doesn't exist.

One of my favorite things in today's day and age is that we label people, like, "gay". We love that word. Boys love "gay", which is funny because they're not. It's interesting. When I'm around my Jewish friends, it's like there's a level of connection that makes, like, "comfortable" is the perfect word. It makes me a lot more comfortable with anything that I say or do. And I can say I feel this way and know that it's a safe place to do that. There are serious things that we deal with on a regular basis too and to have a place where you feel connected and you feel comfortable is awesome, because it enables you to be able to talk about things that you wouldn't otherwise talk about.

(Contrasts being with high school and Jewish friends) They might be thinking in their heads, 'He's so gay'. I'm not really worried about it because I don't think, in this setting it would matter. I mean, we're in a Jewish setting right now and honestly, it wouldn't matter to me. I feel comfortable here.

I mean, it ("gay") definitely prevents you from going further with what you're talking about or what you're doing. I think your comfort level when you're around a bunch of Jews is something that's a lot easier to obtain than when you're around a group of people, whether you know them or not, that's non-Jews. It's people like you. You know immediately when you meet them you have connections with them: 'I'm Jewish and you're Jewish'. I know that the chance of you being a jerk, the chance of you being ignorant about how I feel, is a lot less because you feel some of the things I feel.

Affectionate, non-hierarchical, inclusive relationships

Freer in general than more traditional masculinities, these boys' masculine identities allowed them the capacity to be warm, kind, even affectionate with each other. We were struck by the degree to which many of the boys spoke about and even showed their affection for male friends and siblings during the interviews. The desire for loving, affectionate relationships was shared across a number of these boys in ways that were quite remarkable. Across age differences, these boys were reliably less hierarchical and more supportive. They expressed an enjoyment of their male friendships and did so with an unabashed and even counter-hegemonic ease.

Like, we love the fact that T. is just as much a person as B. is. Like, just because B.'s four years older, he's no, like I shouldn't, I won't, value his opinion, like, more than T.'s.

For this group of boys, in fact, T. seemed the object of considerable attention and nurture. We observed several of the boys – high school seniors to his freshman status - playfully wrestling with him and laughing with him. In our focus group, though he clearly respected and even deferred to these older peers, he had a strong voice of his own and did not seem reticent in response to our questions. And this norm for mutuality and an absence of severe status

distinctions, which can be marked in most boys' groups, extended to other boys besides T., as stories by and other members' younger brothers illustrated.

> *I went in thinking, like, all – everybody's going to ignore me except for the freshmen, only the freshmen are going to talk to other freshmen. And, like, it was the opposite.*

> *Like, last night I brought, I went and hung out at his house with B. and a few other guys, and I brought my brother who's in 8th grade. And he was completely welcomed. And I couldn't do that with my other friends.*

Permission for Self-Expression and Feelings

But, perhaps, the most noteworthy counter-cultural aspect of these boys' masculine identities was observed in the freedom of their emotional expressivity. As we have seen, restrictive emotionality is one of the hallmarks, and one of the most damaging outcomes, of traditional masculinity, signifying a "not feminine" constraint that boys enforce mercilessly on each other throughout boyhood's playgrounds, school hallways and locker rooms. Males adhere to this crippling standard to such an extent that they are typified as stoic or "alexithymic", literally "no words for feelings" (Levant, 1995). Lane & Pollerman (2002) have identified opportunities to encode emotional experiences with language, in actual communication, as fundamental to the development of emotional intelligence. In their view, alexythymia represents "a developmental deficit consisting of a relative absence of emotional experience" (p. 284), so that children fail to develop a nuanced awareness of, or vocabulary for, their feelings. In this sense, boys' normative deprivation in the realm of emotional communication may be the most costly outcome of the dominant masculine paradigm.

Our informants told a very different story, of being able to reveal more of their hearts to each other, within the shared assumptions and relative safety of their common Jewish commitments.

> *With my Jewish friends, I'm a lot more likely to talk about politics or something like that, talk about your feelings, than I am with my non-Jewish friends. And the reason is, I think, just because you feel more comfortable.*

> *I think just in general my (youth group) friends are less judgmental about everything.*

> *Yeah, yeah. Like, they'll support you.*

> *Like, with my athletic friends, more like, the most emotions we probably get to is "I don't like you. You're annoying". We'll talk about girls. But that's all the feelings we really talk about.*

Two boys were able to describe the key difference: Jewish boys are simply less likely to make fun of each other.

Informant 1*: I don't know if I make the assumption that he's not going to ridicule me. I just make the assumption that he's like me.*

Informant 2: *I might not, because he's Jewish. I don't know. That's what I'm saying.*

Informant 1: *Jews have been ridiculed enough in history, that we don't need to ridicule each other to solve anything.*

Informant 2: *We're not going to make fun of him, or anything.*

Lessons from the Less-Engaged

By contrast with the masculinities of the more affiliated boys, those who were less connected to their Jewish communities looked and sounded more typically male, more typically adolescent, describing and accepting stereotypic roles and patterns. And, even though this group had certainly been exposed to Jewish values and support, their masculinities seemed more completely adapted to the mainstream peer and school contexts they lived primarily within. When asked about males in general, a number of these boys responded with popular stereotypes.

Don't you think in general you could say that male adolescents are more relaxed than female adolescents?

I think the image we portray, that we put out, makes it seem like we're just not caring or whatever, that we're just completely out of it. It's not gender. I don't think that seriousness on issues is some gender-specific trait. Just the way we are, I think, composed. It's also like female hormones are a lot worse than guys', because guys are just, like, more grounded, I think.

I mean, guys I think are less outwardly emotional. I think it's more inwardly. I think we keep it more. We're not going to hold everything on our sleeve.

When asked about their circle of friends and their ability to talk "seriously" with them, the boys again marked a difference with their more connected Jewish peers.

Well, I have a really tight circle of friends and, I don't know, I can say anything I want to them and it doesn't matter. But we don't, like, talk about emotional stuff ever. We just have fun, I guess.

Guys don't want to say, "Let's have a Jewish conversation." They want to throw a watermelon off the roof.

Particular Masculine Challenges

As with other aspects of the boys' lives, we found that many of the adults accurately recognized the nature of boys' challenges. There seemed to be awareness on the part of everyone we met with – parents, educators – that there are particular challenges to being male,

ones that bear directly on boys' ability to connect with their Jewish community. For example, these parents, from our focus groups, acknowledged the challenges their sons' experience:

> *Why isn't there anything for boys? I think it's only been recent that people realized that boys had feelings and that they have something to say. It's mainly the girls that were very chatty and I think the boys were supposed to stuff it and be active in sports and have other outlets for their emotions. They weren't supposed to have feelings and emotions.*

> *I want him to be in a group of boys that he feels like there's a connection and that's really hard to find. It's much easier for girls. There's more set up for that and they tend to do that and boys do not.*

> *I think I see my son in conflict between how he may feel, but then there's this demeanor that goes on once you're in the group, of toughness and that stuff. I think it's confusing and it would be helpful to have somewhere to be a safe place to talk about some of that stuff. Also, with Jewish values.*

Implications for Programming

From these rich and revealing conversations with Jewish boys and the adults who care for them, we have learned a number of important insights into their lives. We learned, for example, that there seems to be something about Jewish communal affiliation, broadly defined, that operates as a mediating, or protective, force against socialization into more typical adolescent norms of restrictive masculinity. Our research provided us with glimpses into how boys experience these alternative masculinities and how they make choices, and experience these choices, vis-à-vis their Jewish identities and broader social positions. The boys turned our attention to how they experience their own Jewishness, their own masculinity, and how these intersect and even support each other in active, meaningful ways. The boys also enlightened us about the broader social contexts in which they fashion their identities, including dynamics of anti-Semitism, diasporic identity, and participation in a pluralistic, though Christian-dominated, society. In so doing, they have helped us to understand the terrain upon which they shape their lives and make their life choices and, further, they have given us insight into some of their desires, needs, hopes and concerns about who and how they are in the world.

From these insights, we might surmise some broad guidelines for those eager to create programmatic contexts for Jewish male adolescents. As a small, exploratory study, it is important to be modest about any claims we can make about such a broad and diverse population. However we have nonetheless been empowered by our sincere informants to voice their thoughts and hopes, eager as many were to contribute to this cause. Our goal is to do their thoughts and feelings justice.

Implication One: Affiliation

Among other things, this research project has helped us to reconceptualize the notion of affiliation. Commonly used to connote involvement in formal or informal Jewish spheres such as camps, schools, synagogues, youth or adult groups, and other Jewish connections to organizations or social networks, we found that this notion does not take into account the full realities of our boys' connections to Jewish life, particularly since it suggests a binary - young people are affiliated or unaffiliated – that does not capture the fluidity, developmental and contextual complexity or the continuity of connection their stories described. Our research suggests that we must re-envision young people's involvement more in terms of engagement, connection, and resonance, and that these notions be driven by a concept of personal meaning-making and identification rather than more quantifiable metrics like attendance and participation in structured activities or groups.

Implication Two: Confidence and Pride

Our informants' comments have also underscored for us how significant and useful what they absorb from their Jewish engagements is, on many fronts, in their development. Affording boys a connection to a proud history and connected community identity, supporting a commitment to an activist role in the world, teaching values and a moral code many found instrumental in defining their behavior amidst their peers far from their synagogues: these and many other gifts were described with obvious appreciation and gratitude by both more and less-

affiliated boys. It seemed to us that, given this obviously positive effect in adolescent boys' lives, the Jewish community should be more sanguine about its value and more confident in relation to the predictable testing and ambivalence of Jewish teens' development. We are concerned that the worries and urgencies of educators and parents actually may cause them to misread the opportunities, to push when yielding works better, to rush forward when waiting communicates much more invitation. Supporting adolescent development seems to us to be much like a dance: there are two partners whose moves and rhythms must be gauged. Urgency too often propels adults to ride roughshod over the signals and desires of their teen partners.

Overall, our project essentially validated the usefulness of the Jewish canon for American adolescent boys; that should be deeply reassuring for those hoping to believe in a goodness of fit in an rapidly-evolving cultural context. In particular, the models and supports available for Jewish males struck us as especially relevant to many boys' lives and, among our population, were deeply appreciated. And that is about as much reassurance as these boys will ever offer their seniors. It is up to us to realize who we are to them and what we truly offer.

Implication Three: A Remarkable Opportunity

Many of the boys in our sample were able to find their way to Judaism, fashioning a home for themselves by cobbling together their own particular mix of relationship, education, symbol and religious practice. But we do not wish to convey the impression that their Jewish community made it easy for these boys to accomplish this outcome. On the contrary, many complained about the offerings available to them within formal Jewish institutions, including their families. From stale and dogmatic supplemental education, preachy youth outreach, anxious parents or overly secular youth groups, even the boys who were most Jewishly-affirming explained that they had had to construct their Jewish identities despite significant barriers. Obviously, many other Jewish boys were likely not as intrepid or successful.

One of the most striking mismatches between our boys and the adults we interviewed was found in so many boys complaining about being ignored by their Jewish community leaders while so many devoted parents and dedicated educators despaired of boys showing up for the opportunities that do exist. Yet, when together with us in their focus groups, many boys evinced a longing that was palpable. They wanted a place where they could talk about their lives, with others who could guide and understand them. In other words, there seems to be a remarkable opportunity for the Jewish community to develop programs that can satisfy such boys' needs. Though they routinely encounter programming that does not seem adapted to their lives, they are nonetheless quite open to programming that "gets it right". In fact, as we found, they seem to long for it.

Implication Four: Boys' Agency

Closely related to these insights about the value of Jewish engagement and boys' longing to be with other Jewish boys is the one we have discussed about the intentional, self-actualizing nature of boys' development. Both because they can ultimately be trusted and because they will, in reality, have it no other way, Jewish boys must be permitted to access opportunities for religious education and cultural connection based on their own determination of their needs. By

this, we do not mean that adults must simply wait or subordinate our judgment to adolescent whims. Rather, the stories of our boys revealed that many Jewish teens depend upon the community to provide offerings that will educate, enrich and connect them to each other and to their traditions. How the community performs this service is the issue. Coercion - moral or emotional - will simply bypass the necessity that each boy reckon himself with the contribution Judaism can play in his development.

But if the community perceives itself as facilitating a process of self-discovery and tolerates the ambivalence, exploration and testing of adolescents as they try on, discard, and try on anew the trappings of a Jewish identity, then boys should feel greater permission, even support, to make up their own minds about who they wish to become. Under pressure, they are at risk for reactively rejecting the very resources for development so many of our informants reported to be so helpful.

Implication Five: Partnerships with Boys

Following a recognition of boys' agency in their own development, programs for adolescent boys might best be established in ways that invite boys' hand in design and their full capacities in leadership. Among the most motivating topics in our focus groups were queries to them about how to make Jewish programming "work better". Abundant and very specific ideas always followed, underscoring for us how invested these boys can be in imagining their Jewish worlds. For example, one less-affiliated group spontaneously brain-stormed ideas for the "perfect" group for themselves: begin meetings with sports or games, hold the group at a less religious venue (like the JCC), find younger adult males to lead the group, select topics for discussion that relate to real issues in their lives, etc. Most all of our boys so plainly wanted each other, not to mention their larger community, that it seems a good bet to place resources behind such options as leadership training and program and curriculum development. Nothing deepens discovery more reliably than self-efficacy.

Implication Six: A Role for Mentors

The boys were equally clear that they wanted, indeed needed, mentoring, particularly from younger adult males who can model the passage through to Jewish manhood. Youth in general want contact with adults; that said, they do not generally want domination, coercion or control. It is often difficult for adults to sustain their relationships with young people without reverting to such behaviors. But, if a training and support effort could be developed allowing Jewish youth workers time to self-reflect, grow and continually to renew their relationships with the young people they lead, it seems to us that they would be more likely to manage the respectful partnership and empowering dynamics necessary for effective mentoring. What young man, after all, would not want a warm, attentive, respectful and "cool" adult in his life?

Implication Seven: Recognizing Boys' Actual Lives

Even though we heard some parents and educators describe a few of the challenges their sons must confront as males, we believe that the challenges and threats go much deeper and affect adolescents more thoroughly than those who have "aged out" of adolescence can face.

Young people certainly "co-construct" their gendered identities, choosing among the alternatives they find available. But they are bound by what they can find within the institutions that exist, including our schools, families and synagogues. If these institutions, not to mention the adults populating them, cannot register the realities of male adolescent life, it communicates a tacit endorsement of those realities: the message to our boys is, 'that's the way it is'. The need for Jewish youth-serving institutions to fathom the realities of boys' lives is heightened, it seems to us, by the status accorded to Jewish masculinity as a subordinated and marginalized identity within the larger culture. Young Jewish males certainly perceive, probably quite early on, what the cost will be if they adopt the identities of their fathers and grandfathers. The developmental ramifications of this perception for engagement would seem important to understand better.

To better assist them as they negotiate this tight and even perilous passage, young males need to find adults who can be open without being numb, attentive and sympathetic without being worried, intrusive and controlling. Our informants seemed hungry for spaces in which they could let down their guard and connect more honestly, more humanly, with others who could validate their experience. A group for boys, constructed in a way that welcomes them to be themselves and offers "understanding" rooted in the common, Jewish, counter-cultural masculinity, seems highly desirable.

Implication Eight: Boys' Human Needs

As they confront the realities of masculine identity formation, adults who hope to help Jewish boys must also evaluate their own ability to perceive the human needs of males, even as these are camouflaged, hidden or misplaced. Too many adult caregivers react to boys with feelings of rejection or blame, unable to penetrate boys' survival patterns to see the child needing connection, understanding and safety. Such reactivity impedes their staying connected to teenage boys and interferes with the important contribution they must make to adolescent development. As Neufeld & Mate (2006) put it, adults must serve as "compass points" for youth; they urge us to "hold onto our kids". In particular, adolescent boys need to find their way to adults who will hold onto them, who can serve as compass points for those times when the pressures and temptations of normative adolescence become overwhelming.

Implication Nine: Boys' Need for Emotional Expression

Of course, what this means is staying close enough, in good enough communication, that boys can express themselves to us when they cannot find sufficient safety to do that with their peers. The research about youth assets is clear on this score: connection to adults is among the strongest "protective factors" promoting resilience (Scales and Leffert, 1999). Our informants demonstrated that they are in touch with their need to connect, to express their hearts and to seek understanding; we have every reason to believe from this research that it is possible to build spaces within Jewish contexts to support such boys' accessing these capacities more reliably, even more frequently. Though adolescents will generally prefer to express themselves to other teenagers, except in rare instances it is hard for them to create group contexts in which to do this. A group mentoring design seems promising for this purpose.

We are not in favor of "therapizing" Jewish males. Rather, given the profound threat cast by normative masculinity against most men's emotional ease and health, we recommend that Jewish youth work capitalize on what seemed to us to be a remarkable opportunity: to reinforce the natural tendency for Jewish boys to "be themselves" within the set of assumptions they share for being Jewish males. Adult males who can role model an emotional ease, for example, in a youth group context where alternative norms can be sustained and promoted through a boys' adolescent passage, would constitute a powerful counterweight to mainstream pressures.

Suggestions for Future Research and Inquiry-Based Programming

This research project adopted a qualitative approach as a beginning step in mapping adolescent Jewish boys' lives. After a careful review of existing studies related to this topic, it became clear that it was necessary to undertake such a mapping more carefully than has been done to date. With this study, we have sought to understand, deeply, boys' perspectives on their own lives: their needs, desires, goals, experiences, perspectives and the ways in which they make meaning of these and construct identities in relation to them. In so doing, we were able to uncover and consider conditions and experiences that might support their self-development and deepen their connections to Jewish culture and life. Since one of our key findings is that such engagement with Jewish identity is a resiliency factor for boys, strengthening their resistance to narrow, dehumanizing, masculine pressures, engaging *with boys* to figure out these conditions is both timely and of great importance.

Obviously, from the experience of this relatively small study in a single location, with a convenience sample omitting significant groups of boys found in the overall Jewish population (for example, the less-affiliated group), we must first say that reiterative research efforts along similar lines (that are both exploratory and phenomenological) are necessary to add dimension and complexity to our understanding of Jewish boys' lives and their needs, both personal and institutional. We urge those hoping to develop programs for Jewish males on a local and/or national scale to undertake such efforts in several additional locations, as such research would allow a rich and vital conversation within and across the different contexts about overlapping and conflicting observations. Thus, we believe a crucial next step is to engage in this kind of systematic dialogue with a wider range of boys, both individually and in focus groups, to gain an even broader and more nuanced set of understandings and questions.

Beyond replication efforts, we suggest a next-generation research initiative that falls into the broad category of action research. Action research, by definition, is a process of collaborative, recursive, community-based, action-oriented research that is ideally suited to situations where practitioners wish to gauge, in the effort to create something, how well it is working. In this sense, the model supports a progressive refining of understanding in the actual doing of something, like running a group for Jewish boys.

Action research is, especially, a democratic, empowering, and humanizing approach to community-based inquiry and change (Stringer, 1999). One fundamental premise of this approach is that it is formulated around the problems or issues of a particular group, a community, or an organization. Its primary goal is to assist the actual participants living in communities, by extending their understanding of their situation and context and, thus, in finding solutions to problems that confront them. Community-based action research offers a model for organizing local, action-oriented approaches to inquiry and problem-solving, applying small-scale theorizing to specific questions in local situations (Stringer, 1999, p. 10). Action research thus is a process of inquiry that has the following characteristics:

- It is democratic, enabling the participation of all people.
- It is equitable, acknowledging the significance and worth of all points of view.
- It is liberating, giving voice to marginalized concerns.

- It is life-enhancing, facilitating the expression of people's full hopes and human potential.

Even within the paradigm of action research there is a continuum of participation. In the case of next generation, or Phase Two, research on Jewish boys, we recommend a strong emphasis on boys' participation in the investigatory process, in order that their perspectives be central to the inquiry process as well as to action-oriented results. This kind of participatory action research, as Wadsworth (1998) has stated,

> … is research which involves all relevant parties in actively examining together current action… in order to change and improve it. … Participatory action research is not just research which is hoped will be followed by action. It is action which is researched, changed and re-researched, within the research process by participants…it aims to be active co-research, by and for those to be helped…it tries to be a genuinely democratic or non-coercive process whereby those to be helped, determine the purposes and outcomes of their own inquiry.

Based on the rich complexity and nuance which emerged from our Denver informants, and the fact that it was our research methods which created the conditions allowing them to open up and share their perspectives with us and with each other, we are encouraged that such an approach can be carried forward to the next stage of our theory-building and program development process. Participatory action research, because it is inductive and boy-centered, able to inspire even typically silent or marginalized groups to believe that their voices will matter, offers researchers the potential to co-create, with boys, new opportunities to foster boys' positive self-development.

Considering what we learned from this Denver study, three specific participatory action research-based initiatives occur to us. There are certainly other possibilities.

1. *A Training Institute for Jewish Youth Workers*. We suggest gathering a small group of youth workers, from across a variety of contexts but all presently serving Jewish boys, to constitute a first cohort in a training institute focused on the developmental and social concerns of Jewish boys. This first group would both test and further develop a curriculum for such groups. The curriculum would be theory-based, drawing from existing models for youth development and mentoring, as well as derived from insights provided by the present study (e.g., regarding the presence of anti-Semitism in Jewish boys' lives or the significance of their finding "safety" with other Jewish boys). Researched for outcomes, this action research pilot project also would offer a substantive opportunity to explore qualities that work and that interfere with Jewish youth work. This would contribute to the improvement of practice with Jewish boys through developing a greater understanding of their needs and the issues they face. It would also elicit a range of perspectives on Jewish boys' realities and needs from people who work with them and relate to them in ongoing ways. Additionally, this institute would provide a broad and deep dialogue about program development and service provision for Jewish boys.

2. *Boys as Co-Developers of Initiatives and Experiences*. The development, with a representative set of boys, of programming and experiences that are co-

constructed and then studied in terms of their success reaching, engaging and retaining a wide range of Jewish boys over time, would be the thrust of this research-based program development project. To begin, researchers would select, through purposive sampling, and engage with a diverse set of Jewish boys as true collaborators in developing, designing, and implementing programs and experiences for themselves and others. The researchers would engage these boys in a deep examination of how these programs (broadly defined) map onto their social, psychological, and relational contexts, desires, concerns, and needs. Engaging boys in this way will allow for programming and experiences to be genuinely, inductively, co-created, an approach we see as the best way to ensure that such initiatives truly resonate with real, diverse boys and actually fit their needs, desires, and goals for their self-development. The goal is for this program development process to be genuine, inductive, and resonant for these boys and for a diverse range of Jewish boys. This kind of evidence-based, collaborative, youth-centered experience development is the real hope for engaging Jewish boys in meaningful events and experiences over time.

3. ***Peer-to-Peer Dialogue Groups.*** Specifically to explore the experience of boys' talking with each other about their lives, creating in such group dialogue a context on which they can depend for their self-development and emotional self-care, we suggest that a group (or several groups) of boys ages 15-18 be brought together on a regular basis to talk about their feelings, struggles, passions, needs and views of life. We suggest that group facilitators/researchers record and analyze these conversations, as well as boys' perspectives on the process (collected through additional interviews and focus groups), in order to better understand and interrogate the boys' experiences as well as to get feedback on what is and is not working with respect to their experiences in the group and more broadly in their lives. The ultimate result of such an action research process would be a greater understanding of how adults can help boys create conditions that allow them to share their experience as boys with each other.

We believe that these three action research steps would mutually inform each other and could pave the way for the development of initiatives truly built from diverse boys' experiences and perspectives. Based on the moving experience of engaging with the boys in our study, we have concluded that Jewish boys are ready, eager, to help and that, therefore, the only way to move forward on the development of programs to serve these boys is to engage in action-oriented research *with* them, rather than on them. Our work to date has persuaded us that there is great promise for a reinvigorated, resonant, boy-centered engagement in the Jewish community for this generation of boys, and for generations to come.

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