Symposium: Youth Engagement

Guest Editors’ Introduction

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The longest single narrative in the book of Genesis is about Joseph and his journey from innocence to maturity. The Bible introduces Joseph as Yoseph Ba’al HaChalomot (Joseph the Dreamer). His first dreams are family affairs—about himself and his brothers. His later dreams prophesy feast followed by famine. Joseph’s gift for interpreting dreams earns Pharaoh’s trust and ultimately the position of Vice-Pharaoh. When our sages and scholars looked back on Joseph’s life and achievements, they did not refer to him as Yoseph Ba’al HaChalomot; rather, they referred to him as Yoseph HaTzadik (Joseph the Righteous Person). Why? Because dreaming alone accomplishes little, but bringing a dream to life, realizing a vision for the future, is far more virtuous and can change the world. Joseph shared his dreams with others, and then found himself within the solution.

Three and a half years ago, at the Union for Reform Judaism’s Biennial meeting, the URJ officially launched the Campaign for Youth Engagement, committing to a 2020 Vision, in which by 2020 a majority of Reform Jewish youth will be engaged in our Movement’s synagogues, day schools, and summer programs and engaged in year-round Jewish experiences. It was the first time in the history of our Reform Movement that every single constituency of the Movement stood together on the same platform for a cause. It was in fact a most self-reflective moment our Movement has faced in many years. It was a courageous act to look in the mirror and acknowledge that our Movement’s commitment to teen
engagement is broken and in need of repair, that our Movement’s constituencies and communities fall far short of our responsibilities and our goals for our youth. But while we are not “there yet,” we are creating a meaningful vision for what could and can be. We begin as Joseph did, as dreamers. And as the wisdom of our sages teaches us, we now must move from dreaming to action. We will share our dreams for our youth, and we will also find ourselves within the solution.

Each author in this Symposium for Youth Engagement is a recognized leader in his or her field, offers a unique expertise in an aspect of teen engagement, and addresses both vision and implementation. Where are our youth developmentally? What needs to be nurtured and what needs to be challenged? Who needs to be nurtured and who needs to be challenged? Where do rabbis fit into the equation? What Jewish life-cycle opportunities for youth are presenting themselves anew? What educational models are ripe for reimagining? What programs are responding to current best thinking and practice for youth engagement? What about these engagement tools is “sticking?” Many of these articles—from colleagues and teachers—begin to answer these and other questions.

Theodore Herzl seemed to speak about Joseph the teenager, and to us, when he said, “Im Tirzu Ein Zo Aggadah.” (If you will it, it is no dream.) We certainly will, or want, the most vibrant models and opportunities for Reform Jewish youth engagement in North America, Israel and throughout the world. This journal symposium contributes to that effort.