On Being a Rabbi

Audacious Education:
Why Educating to the
Boy Brain Educates All

Jon Hanish and Becky Hoffman

Introduction

Twenty-five years ago, no one was concerned with the question, “How do we keep our boys involved in synagogue life after their bar mitzvah ceremonies?” Today, when we look at our confirmation classes, youth group boards, and camper enrollment, we have hard evidence that involvement in Jewish life within our male population is dwindling. While solutions abound with the goal of creating higher levels of engagement, most ideas are centered on new programs. We need to grasp the fact that it’s not a new program that will help us retain boys, but a better understanding of what interests them and to apply that knowledge to our already existing programs. This integration has to start the day a child enters religious school. We’re not discounting new programs. But, even the greatest of new programs will fail if it doesn’t take into account how boys are wired. By educating to the male brain, we will be able to engage all students. This will inevitably strengthen the bond between student and institution that will last long after the bar mitzvah ceremony.

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Rabbis Hanish and Hoffman are currently writing a book focusing on brain breaks for religious schools.
We already know that sitting still after a full day of elementary or middle school classes or on a sunny Sunday morning holds no interest to most children, but for boys this is especially true. They want to play. And what do we tell them to do? Sit down. And when boys do show up to our classrooms, so often, what interests them is completely uninteresting to their teachers. How many teachers have ever had a meaningful conversation about Minecraft, Clash of Clans, or Plants vs. Zombies during a religious school session? A fifth grade boy can discuss these topics for hours. We need to stop being distracted, annoyed, or even disgusted by their natural curiosity and activity level and start seeing the world through their eyes. If we don’t educate our teachers, our youth group advisors, and religious school directors about the male brain, we will not succeed in retaining them as they transform into teenagers and then adults. Since 2006, as a team, we’ve read books and articles on how to stop the flow of men and boys from churches and synagogues by such distinguished authors as Rabbi Jeff Salkin, Pastor Tim Wright, Doug Barden, David Murrow, and Michael Gurian.1 In addition to academic exploration, we have also experimented with different ideas in our religious school educational setting. From personal education to practical implementation, we developed a clearer, simpler vision of how to create a space for boys within religious schools leading us to the realization that there are ways to create a boy-friendly synagogue and they do not involve creating new programs. As we have been exposed to these ideas, we have shared them with the staff.

As you read on, please remember that 80 percent of our statements are true for all boys. We will not claim that every child fits this paradigm because they don’t. As we delve into this topic together, first, we are going to explore the basic science with the caveat that we are merely rabbis, not scientists. Next, we will present several case studies based on this scientific research that will illustrate how this knowledge can be applied in the synagogue setting. In our final case study, we will present nine ideas that will assist you in training your teachers to better educate to the male brain.

**Science and Statistics**

Neurobiologists have uncovered over one hundred differences between the brains of boys and girls. Some of these differences
include boys having between ten and twenty times more testosterone than girls (testosterone is a risk-taking and aggression chemical), boys having less oxytocin (a bonding chemical), and boys having less serotonin (a calming chemical). Without quoting entire studies word for word, the simple conclusion is male and female brains are wired differently. This is a fact that scientists have proven by studying hundreds of thousands of brain scans. These differences are reflected in the following facts.

- For every 100 girls suspended from public elementary and secondary schools, 250 boys are suspended. For every 100 girls expelled, 355 boys are expelled.
- For every 100 girls diagnosed with a learning disability, 276 boys are diagnosed.
- For every 100 girls diagnosed with an emotional disturbance, 324 boys are diagnosed.
- Boys are three times more likely to be treated for ADHD.
- Eighty-five percent of stimulant addressing drugs in the world are prescribed to boys in the United States.²

It cannot simply be that boys are bad and girls are not as bad. There is a systemic problem with how our educational institutions are formed that favors girls. It seems that our society is creating systems that work for girls in a greater ratio than for boys. In the hopes of getting better behavior from our boys, we turn to harsh consequences or medication. In The Purpose of Boys, Michael Gurian writes, “Now, many boys cannot find relevance or the male learning style in their schooling.”³ Michael Gurian goes on to write, “A century ago, the schooling of boys would have involved more debates, more competition, more outdoor learning, more hands-on apprenticeship, more coaching in purpose and meaning. Now, many boys cannot find relevance or the male learning style in their schooling.”⁴ We know from experience that this isn’t limited to our public schools; it also includes our religious schools. These types of activities stimulate a boy’s brain. And we, as Jewish professionals, cannot hide behind the “That-is-public-school-and-it-doesn’t-apply-to-us” attitude. Look around and you know that it applies to us. We see it every time a staff member tells a child not to run down the hall or not to speak so loudly. We see the evidence of this loss of boy-focus all the time in our religious school setting. As we lose these foci, we move away from a boy-friendly
educational system. Our schools are ignoring what we naturally knew just a few decades ago. Today, science is leading us back to the same conclusions.

Case Study #1: A “Successful” Retreat Program That Failed

In 2006, as a rabbinic student, Jon Hanish spent two years working with Los Angeles Federation employees Lori Port and Jonathan Freund designing and running “It’s a Guy Thing,” a father/son retreat with amazing results as attested to by a consultant whose sole responsibility was to survey and interview participants before, during, and after the program. The goal was to provide a weekend retreat for post-b’nai mitzvah teens and their fathers that would create the desire to actively participate in their home synagogues. In other words, the goal was to light a fire under them that would drive them back to their synagogues.

There were three basic rules of design for the retreat: (1) keep the boys moving by creating fifteen-to-twenty-minute programming blocks, (2) design goal-oriented programs, and (3) accept their teenage comments without critique of language or content. Fathers and sons left the retreat feeling that their bonds had strengthened due to the programming that was provided. The weekend retreat was a success. Fathers and sons, who had never really talked, did. Men, who did not have other male friends, connected. They shared their trials and tribulations of what it meant to be a father and a man—a topic for which they had deep feelings, but had hardly ever discussed. The whole retreat had a distinctly male feel to it. Bonds were created, memories shared and stored, phone numbers exchanged, and exclamations of “We love this! We will come back!” were heard. Grants were offered to continue programming efforts at local synagogues. Some took advantage of this offer; some did not.

Six months later, when a follow-up program was attempted, interest was almost nonexistent. The weekend structure hadn’t integrated into their religious school institutions and so did not permeate the walls of their “regular” lives. A beautiful island had been created, but they couldn’t live on the island permanently.

The retreat program lasted five years. Successful in its own right, it was unable to solve the problem for which it had been created originally. We began to wrestle with the question, how do we take
the three core ideas of this program and move them into the heart of our religious school?

Case Study #2: Structure Matters

The Temple Kol Tikvah religious school offers an alternative to a weekly religious school program. Fourth, fifth, and sixth graders are given the option of a one-day-a-month camp experience. The combined hours for the traditional and the alternative program are equivalent. Two years ago, we created what we thought was a boy-friendly program. We had outdoor activities (sports, ropes course, nature learning) interspersed with camp-style educational programming. Who wouldn’t want to go from outdoor t’filah to a study session to a climbing wall? Who wouldn’t want to play soccer or shoot hoops after lunch? Who wouldn’t want to spend a day at camp?

The first year we ran this program, our biggest complaints came from boys and the parents of boys. What were we doing that was causing these complaints? We determined that there were two problems and neither problem was with the meta of our program. The problem was with the micro. We turned to the rules of programming created eight years ago at the father/son retreat program.

The first problem was the hour-long structure of each program. Children, especially boys, can only focus fifteen to twenty minutes at time. Our educational programs and our fun activities were scheduled in one-hour blocks. A few sessions into our alternative religious school, the educational programs were redesigned. The children never sat in one place for more than fifteen to twenty minutes. At chugim, where only one or two children could participate at a time, such as the climbing wall, the staff was given other activities to keep the children engaged. As we started to program within the hour, breaking the activity into fifteen-to-twenty-minute chunks, not only did the complaints from parents about children being bored disappear, but the participants enjoyed the program more. Boys were no longer getting antsy because we kept varying the program for their fifteen-to-twenty-minutes-at-a-time attention span. When we programmed to engage the boys, all of the participants benefited.

The second problem was seeing the world through a boy’s eyes, not an easy chore on a good day for most adults. For example, one
Sunday, a group of boys found a dead bullfrog in the middle of a soccer field near the area where we were having lunch. Slowly, more and more boys and a few girls gathered around the dead frog. Rumors were being whispered among the children, “There’s a big, gross dead frog over there.” Rabbi Jon decided to keep his distance to see how the staff would handle this situation. When a staff member finally joined them, her reaction was, “I want everyone to stay away from that, it’s disgusting.” The children who surrounded the frog were being taught that their natural curiosity was somehow wrong. Rabbi Jon joined the group and did not fare much better. He asked them about the frog, listened to their conversation, and let them look at it. He neither commended them for their curiosity nor did he use their discovery as an educational tool. A few minutes later, a child brought Becky Hoffman over to see the frog. Like the teacher and Rabbi Jon, she wasn’t sure how to handle the situation.

The next day, we reflected on how we should have handled this scenario. What should have happened? Suddenly, we had all the answers. We could have asked them how they thought it died, leading to a conversation about l’dor v’dor. We could have done a spontaneous funeral thereby teaching them about Jewish mourning rituals. We could have talked about the second plague and how after the frogs died there were giant stacks of smelly carcasses everywhere. We could have made their discovery something important instead of something embarrassing.

We have learned from this incident. When we happen on something, disgusting or commonplace, we look for the teaching moment. Rather than saying that’s gross, that’s boring, or that’s annoying, we search for a way to connect with the child over this experience. Since the frog incident, we let students explore and we try not to be disgusted by their finds, and we attempt to use their discoveries as part of a boy-friendly philosophy.

We have even gone so far as to let them pick up walking sticks after years of “Put it down, you might poke out someone’s eye.” When they start to sword fight with the sticks, we don’t say “Stop,” we say “Be careful.”

Ultimately, we took a program that looked fine on paper and found that even with its camp-like activities, we weren’t focused enough on what boys need. This was not a new program. However, only when we applied the idea of educating to the male brain were
we able to refine the structure and create a program that all our students loved. By breaking up hour-long programming blocks into shorter sections and by focusing on what interests boys, the program improved.

Case Study #3: Same-Gender Education

Pastor Tom Wright struggled with the loss of men and boys in his Phoenix church, Community of Grace. In his book Searching for Tom Sawyer he writes:

Sunday school is based on sitting still for long periods of time, which boys are not wired to do. It involves reading out loud, which boy brains don’t do as well as girl brains at young ages. Boys have difficulty reading in front of the class and therefore find themselves embarrassed when the girls laugh at them. Girls excel in that environment, and boys know it. And before long, boys see Sunday school as girly. No wonder they end up leaving the church as soon as they can.6

After coming to this conclusion, Wright goes on to explain that he immediately met with his Sunday school leaders and decided to separate the third to sixth grade boys from the girls.7 Within a liberal Jewish community this might seem like heresy, but it is not. It is simply accepting the reality of the differences between the brains of boys and girls.

While Temple Kol Tikvah hasn’t gone as far as Pastor Wright’s church, we frequently break up our students into same-gender groups for specific programs such as the afternoon chugim at our alternative religious school, Hebrew Pods, and, on occasion, our Teen Tuesday program. We attempt to strike a balance between learning to work together and the best approaches to learning for each gender group. The goal is to benefit both boys and girls with an optimal learning experience. By balancing gender-specific groups with mixed-gender groups, we enhance the educational experiences for all students.

By separating our boys and girls, we can immediately go to the ideas in our tradition that speak directly to boys. When boys are in boy-only groups, we can motivate them by teaching them “boy” stories. For example, we can talk about war and Temple sacrifices. Boys relate to these topics in a different way than girls. They want
to understand Joshua’s wartime strategy or how the Kohein Gadol cut into the lamb. So often, we sanitize our Jewish stories to no longer include warfare or violence. We tell sweet tales that we feel are appropriate. The problem with these stories is that they don’t intrigue the boys. When was the last time you taught about any of the battles found in Chumash, Judges, and other books of the Tanach?

The goal is not to teach violence. The goal is to teach the hero’s journey. Boys intuitively understand the need to face challenges and to become a hero. Why are action movies so important to boys and men? Because they instinctually connect to the idea of a journey. When boys are sword fighting with sticks, they are not doing so because they want to be violent, but because they are making their first foray into the world of the hero. The same is true when they decide they are superheroes. The goal is to encourage their path to self-discovery. In a religious school classroom, it is important to find a way for them to take that hero’s journey. Make Abraham, Moses, and Joshua your new X-Men and see how excited your boys become. Here is a proposal for a new rule of thumb: “Can this story be turned into a video game that a boy would like to play?” If the answer is “yes,” then teach it.

The next time you teach the story of the battle of Jericho, consider running around the playground pretending that you are about to attack this ancient city. The students will be excited by the physicality of the study and by the imagination they need to use to re-create the event. This is a boy-friendly educational program that involves not just the boys, but the girls, too. Girls are given permission to play war and become heroes. What an incredible lesson—to empower women to be as strong and participatory as men in the story of the Jewish People. Ultimately, the goal is not “separate but equal” but providing what will maximize a child’s educational experience within the walls of a religious school.

**Case Study #4: Not New Programs, New Ideas within Programs**

Complaints were arising about a beloved teacher with over twenty years of teaching experience. It began with one comment from a father whose son was in her class. He didn’t want to complain about the teacher, but felt that she was being unduly harsh to her male students. Within a week, more complaints started to arise about
this teacher and her interactions with boys. When approached about these issues, she was ready and willing to fix the problem. Her love for the students was apparent.

She came up with a solution that she knew would work. She decided to create a reward system where students who could sit still for a full hour would be rewarded with candy. We’re not against reward systems. The problem with her solution was that the expectation for any student to sit for a full hour was unrealistic no matter their age or gender. She was going to retrain them to do what she wanted regardless of their natural wiring. Instead of setting up a variety of workstations where a child could go from activity to activity or designing the class in shorter blocks, she was determined that the best course of action was to train them to do as she desired. We did not want the boys in class to feel “less than” because they were unable to sit still for long periods of time.

This scenario made us aware that many religious school teachers, while well-meaning and well-educated, are not knowledgeable in regards to working with boys. It also showed us that while many of our teachers are aware of different models of teaching in the classroom environment, many do not employ these models. If teaching to the male brain is a value in the educational setting, teachers who do not buy into that value should no longer be seen as the right match for the institution. With this newfound knowledge on our part, we thought it was only fair to discuss these concepts with our teaching staff to convey how much we value teaching to the male brain.

We created a training session prior to the start of the academic year that focused on this issue. We sat with our religious school teachers and discussed ways to keep boys involved in classroom activities so the scenario described previously would not arise again. We based the teaching on ideas espoused by the Gurian Institute.

This is a short summary of what was taught:

1. Brain Breaks are short one-to-two-minute activities that give a child a chance to move after having sat for an extended period of time thereby improving their ability to learn. Studies show that Brain Breaks should occur every fifteen to twenty minutes when doing a non-active learning exercise.\(^9\)
2. Minimize non-active learning exercises such as “repeat after me” and workbooks. These do not stimulate a child’s mind or creativity. If they are using workbooks or reading, let them lounge around the room. Some children learn more effectively while standing and others while lying on the floor. Don’t force them to sit at tables.

3. Break your schedule up into fifteen-to-twenty-minute blocks, varying between active and passive activities. Or, better yet, do only active learning.

4. Use the temple’s facility. Play Hebrew letter basketball in the parking lot. Lead a Hebrew letter yoga class in the social hall. Enact the storming of Jericho in the playground. Instead of lecturing about Torah, go and open one up.

5. Create exercises and projects that are goal-oriented because boys are goal-oriented.

6. Allow boys to be boys and allow girls to be girls. Don’t shy away from the gross or juvenile if that is their interest. Boys write/speak for boys and girls write/speak for girls. All the while, be conscious of time, place, and manner. In other words, remember that there is different decorum depending on location and composition of group.

7. Give children time to process, especially boys. For elementary and middle school students, boys need more time for processing questions. If you want to see an increased number of raised hands then you need to give boys time to process the teacher’s question. For example, ask your students to write down an answer to a question before asking for a show of hands. You’ll see that the time you give them to reflect will create an environment where more male students will raise their hands.

8. If students are discussing topics in chevruta groups, create a way for them to do this actively. For example, have them strap on imaginary ice skates and skate around the room or shoot at an imaginary basketball hoop as they talk. A basic rule for boys is that physical activity and z-axis stimulation activates the brain.

9. Do not be afraid to create gender-specific groups. We should not be afraid to pair up boys with boys. Do not be afraid of noise and do not be afraid of quiet. Give all students the space that they need to create. A teacher should not feel bound to
keeping all their students within the four walls of their classroom or even dividing the students into two different locations. Obviously, the teacher should be aware of what is happening in both spaces.

This is just a beginning. Without writing a book on this topic, it is impossible to give a full list of what needs to be done in a classroom. For part-time teachers, this list can be a beginning of a longer educational process. Try introducing these nine ideas into your programmatic environment and observe how different and engaging learning can be.

Conclusion

Our work is in its infancy with our knowledge growing on a daily basis about the differences between male and female brains and how best to use this knowledge in synagogue and church religious schools. As much as we might fight against it, boys and girls are different. Once this basic fact is acknowledged, educators have to ask themselves, “How am I going to educate for these differences?” Simple steps will lead to great changes, not through the creation of new programs, but through the attention paid to the details of already-existing educational experiences.

Once the boys are engaged, all of the students will be engaged. This creates an active and dynamic learning environment that will never be described as “boring.” Every moment will be a learning opportunity—from the planned lesson to the walk down the hall—and will become infused with the idea of learning, relationship, and engagement. This leads to retention. If a student feels that they are valued, they will respond with their loyalty.

In a Reform congregation, it is audacious to pay more attention to the learning needs of boys. In a liberal and post-civil rights era it can be perceived as sexist. But the fact remains that we need to think about the male brain differently and acknowledge that boys and girls think differently. If we educate to the male brain by utilizing fifteen-to-twenty-minute educational time-blocks, by meeting them where they are, and by shedding light on real experiences that intrigue them, we will engage all of our students and propel them to a deeper love of and connection to Judaism.
Notes

1. Jon Hanish attended the Gurian Institute in 2013, a group that focuses its efforts on a scientific understanding of brain differences between boys and girls and how to best educate them.


3. Ibid., 19.

4. Ibid., 19.

5. This was not our first experience with once-a-month programs. While working as an assistant rabbi at Kehillat Israel, Rabbi Jon Hanish had a similar program.


7. Ibid.

8. Many authors write about the hero’s journey. The most complete description is given in Joseph Campbell’s book, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

9. Google the term “brain breaks” and you will find hundreds, if not thousands, of examples.

10. *Chevruta* study is the pairing of *chaverim* (friends) for study. If you have ever seen two boys in a yeshiva studying, they argue with each other about the meaning of a Jewish teaching until they feel like they’ve fully fleshed out its meaning.

11. Z-axis is the third dimensional line that represents depth on a graph. Z-axis stimulation is movement through space. An example of z-axis movement would be tossing a baseball between two players. When z-axis movement occurs, it stimulates and engages a boy’s brain. Therefore, in an educational setting, when we create activities that stimulate along the lines of the z-axis we are helping boys take in information.