

Nourishing the Adolescent Soul:



INSIGHTS & RECOMMENDATIONS
TO SUPPORT RELIGIOUS AND
SPIRITUAL GROWTH

RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING IN ADOLESCENT CHILDREN (RUACH)

GENEROUSLY SUPPORTED BY FUNDING FROM THE AVI CHAI FOUNDATION



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Ordained with semicha by Yeshiva University, Rabbi Jordan Rosenberg currently directs the RUACH project at Yeshiva University’s Institute for University School Partnership. During rabbinical school, Jordan served as an associate rabbi at Congregation Beth Shalom in Lawrence, NY. Included in the Jewish Week’s inaugural cohort of “36 Under 36: The Next Wave of Jewish Innovators”, Jordan founded Traveling on the Path (T.O.P.); an organization founded to further Jewish religious education in wilderness settings. A Magna Cum Laude graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, as well as a Wexner Graduate Fellow, Jordan began his post-collegiate teaching career during two years at the Maimonides School in Brookline, MA under the auspices of the inaugural Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik teaching fellowship. Jordan has also been a Talmud rebbe, Tanach instructor, and Shakespeare teacher at Yeshiva University High School for Boys (YUHSB).

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Throughout this article, we have provided the reader with ideas about how to connect students to G-d in more effective and long-lasting ways. We have also provided, in lift-quotes, the opinions of day school students from schools involved with the RUACH project. These student opinions were shared during qualitative interviews with the RUACH research team and are focused on areas of spiritual connection and alienation.

While we do not presume that each student must experience profound spiritual moments on a minute-by-minute basis, we do, however, believe significant improvement is needed when it comes to nourishing the souls in our spheres of influence. Contained within this article are reasonable, practical, and actionable recommendations for all those interested in the spiritual wellbeing of Jewish youth. By listening to the voices of students, as well as heeding our recommendations and ideas -taken either individually or in combination- adults can create environments that are conducive to nourishing the souls of the youth in our schools and communities.

High school religious educators face a population whose spiritual development is very much in flux. The high school years, for some students, are the nadir of students' religious behavior and spiritual receptivity. Our project "Religious Understanding in Adolescent Children" (RUACH), generously supported by the AVI CHAI Foundation, as well as years of experience as psychologists and educators in Jewish schools and communities, has helped us appreciate the nature of adolescent spirituality. A better understanding of adolescent spirituality is particularly important in light of reports that, relative to other religions, American Jewish adolescents ranked lowest amongst the surveyed youths in terms of religious vitality and in terms of Jewish spirituality being a significant component of their identities.

The development of religious and spiritual values in adolescence is inextricably intertwined with the general process of adolescent development. To properly understand the cognitive and emotional maturation

of adolescents, one must look at the unique changes in adolescent thinking processes relative to their earlier cognitive level. Upon reaching adolescence, youth begin thinking "in a new key." They express a newfound ability to think abstractly. This newfound skill is at times expressed by challenging religious actions and beliefs. These challenges can be viewed as part of the process of "taking ownership" of the religious aspects of their life. Much of the critical nature of adolescents, as well as their need to define themselves by testing the limits of adult rules and guidelines in the area of religion, stems from a cocktail of this newfound facility in abstract thinking with an adolescent's healthy inclination towards forging an independent sense of self and identity.

Our understanding of adolescent development has been recently enhanced by advances in neurobiological research. The adolescent brain undergoes a number of changes that result in relatively weaker ability in areas of perspective taking and judgment during the mid-adolescent

years. This is followed by significant improvement in brain maturation and associated improvement in behavior by late adolescence. It is therefore not surprising that during adolescence religious change is not only normal but to be expected. For example, longitudinal research from the general American population suggests that just as adolescents change their behavior, friends and the color of their hair from one year to the next, their religious practice also reflects the fluid nature of adolescent identity formation.

The RUACH project included qualitative and quantitative investigation of close to 2000 students attending Modern Orthodox Jewish high schools across North America. Through a combination of our quantitative data and focus groups of selected students in participant schools, we developed an understanding of what connects our youth to and alienates them from G-d. Our analyses of spiritual "connectors" and "alienators" is followed by a summary of our findings of the primary sources of connection.

Multiple Pathways to Spirituality

Perhaps the most important principle to keep in mind in approaching the spiritual education of adolescents is the insight that there are multiple pathways to spiritual connection.

Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchak of Lublin, the 18th century chasidic rabbi better known as the Seer of Lublin, beautifully captures this insight:

"It is impossible to tell people what way they should take. For one way to serve G-d is through learning, another through prayer, another through fasting and still another through eating. Everyone should carefully observe what way his heart draws him to, and then choose his way with all his strength."

While it is clear that what works for one teen, will leave another feeling disconnected and alienated, there are nevertheless common trends that emerge as more salient for adolescents.

As one student interviewed by the RUACH project put it:

"A big turn-off is how they tend to be against variety in the school. They expect a certain mold. If you don't fit that mold they don't accept you—school can be alienating"



Alienators

In the highly structured and academically rigorous world of the Jewish day school, there is little psychological space for the souls of our students to be nourished by their teachers and mentors or even by the students themselves. Jewish schools can be environments where, rigorous academic requirements and the packed schedule necessitated by a dual curriculum may leave students little room for deep and meaningful conversations with adults or peers. The stillness necessary for meaningful introspection is often absent. Indeed, the informal settings of camp, shabbatonim, and the like appear to provide the room for students to connect whereas the school structure of religious education closes off that possible connectivity for many students. Given the structured nature of most high schools, it is difficult to create a space that gives adolescents the choice and psychological support to foster such spiritual connections.

This is captured beautifully in the following:

Crashing Through the Woods: If we want to support each other's inner lives, we must remember a simple truth: the human soul does not want to be fixed, it wants simply to be seen and heard. If we want to see and hear a person's soul, there is another truth we must remember: the soul is like a wild animal—tough, resilient, and yet shy. When we go crashing through the woods shouting for it to come out so we can help it, the soul will stay in hiding. But if we are willing to sit quietly and wait for a while, the soul may show itself.

- Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*.

“When rebbeim shush, snap and tap me on the head. Rebbeim are not here to make us daven but to influence us.”

“The amount of work that they give us, especially in the “Judaic stuff” is more stressful, we are stressing over these subjects. It’s a turn-off, I am disliking the religion because we are forced to study so much”

Unfortunately, the school structures that alienate students are often pillars of the educational system, such as grading and discipline. Whereas in math, science, English, or other academic subjects, grading creates accountability for students that can be helpful, grading in Judaic studies does more than report on student learning. Judaic studies classes are taught in order to deepen and enrich the religious life of a student. Academic assessment in Judaic studies can be perceived by the students as passing judgment on his or her religious and spiritual life.

Likewise, while optimal learning occurs in a classroom with clear behavioral expectations and consequences for not meeting those expectations, such consequences for tefillah (prayer) infractions serves to alienate students. Students have described feeling that teachers are “driving [them] away from meaningful tefillah” as opposed to promoting ideal behavior and practices.

Instructing students in religious practices is quite complex as it has several potential alienating side effects. Teaching religious behaviors often centers around the “do nots” of Judaism, relegating Judaism to “a religion of no.” This also creates a situation in which basic religious behavioral expectations (e.g., wearing a kippah, punctuality for tefillah) leads to power struggles over these relatively minor religious expressions. The focus on practice consumes the curriculum with little or no space left for G-d.

Schools often struggle to create a safe space for students grappling with religious behaviors and beliefs. There isn't time in the day for students to explore their opinions or questions with adults or their fellow students. Missing in schools is the opportunity to have frank conversations about religious beliefs or the freedom to ask questions about behavioral expectations. In the rare occasions when, as has been

reported to us, questions are asked, students state that defensive and apologetic responses are often given.

The adults in the lives of students are role models regardless of whether they actively pursue that title. Religious inconsistency and lack of sincerity on the part of adults are additional alienators. Educators sometimes expect more consistency and sincerity

from students than they do of themselves. Their behavior is viewed by students as hypocrisy, and such adults are dismissed as role models.

The structured environment of the school, however, can also be viewed as amazing opportunities to connect our youth to spirituality.

“ I am turned off by only one hashkafic mindset being brought in a rigid, non-flexible way.”



Connectors

Connecting students spiritually is often viewed by educators as a result of knowing the answers to life's great questions of "how" and "why." Over and above just providing answers, creating a culture of inquiry, where students are listened to, and where their questions are validated, can profoundly affect students.

Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, the great Jerusalem-based spiritual guide of the last generation, would regularly say:

“There is no such thing as a heretical question, only a heretical answer.”

Teachers need to listen to questions and be open to other perspectives. While it may seem discomfiting or counter-intuitive to a committed Jewish educator, allowing inquiry and promoting student exploration provides space through which students can eventually connect to spirituality.

Sometimes, modeling a lack of knowledge can be a source of connection. Allowing students to see educators' own areas of challenge and growth, mediated by discussions about approaching spirituality despite challenges, transmutes those challenges and inconsistencies from weakness to strength. Educators create connections for students when educators serve as non-judgmental

The information that appears in the quotes permeating this article, are opinions shared with the RUACH research team during qualitative interviews with the students of the 6 RUACH schools. Our interviews multiple representative samples in each school were typically an hour in length. The opinions shared focused primarily on issues related to spiritual connection and alienation.

“ ...They don't really care for us. I feel that they should care for us. But they don't.

...Having a good relationship with your rabbi (teacher). You respect them and take what they are saying to heart. A rabbi that can talk to you personally.

...There are times in the classroom when I feel that I am being indoctrinated. For example, a midrash that foolishly exonerates someone in the Tanakh.

...Teachers who are less opinionated—not his way or the highway. ”

role models, and not as overwhelmingly knowledgeable, perfect, and pious demi-angels. Educators need to use literature, personal events, and the reality of students' lives, whether tragic or joyous, as opportunities to listen to students and opportunities to learn from them. These moments of real sharing are teachable moments not because educators get to share their dogma. Rather, the teach-

ing of these moments is between students and their peers and between students and themselves.

Educators need to create spaces within the busy schedule of students for deep and meaningful conversations with and between students. For some, stillness alone is enough. For others, music, a rustic or natural habitat, art, or poetry will be the

connector. While it might be easier to develop isolated informal programs that incorporate these opportunities, these opportunities can be integrated within the school environment as well. One way to incorporate these moments is to develop periodic "spiritual check-ups"—safe spaces for each individual student to speak with an adult about the role that G-d plays in their lives.

““ *Students should want to feel that they can talk to their rabbis. Our mentors should have office hours.*

Developmentally Informed Approaches to Enhancing Adolescent Spirituality

As noted earlier, religious connection during adolescence takes place in the context of their rapidly shifting cognitive and social development. Understanding this process can help the educator develop a more effective, develop-

mentally informed response to challenges they face in working with students who are struggling with feelings of spiritual apathy and alienation.

““ *I love the Halacha teacher, he gives 6 different opinions, pointing out the lenient and the machmir ones. He incorporates a lot of hashkafa”*

Cognitive:

Educators must keep in mind that sarcasm, challenge, and questioning often stem from an adolescent's newfound ability to think abstractly and independently. Allowing and encouraging questioning often has the paradoxical benefit of increased connection. Conversely,

responding to questioning with annoyance, condescension, or irritation can easily promote the negative feelings of alienation and rejection within students. Similarly, a lack of humility in discussions of theodicy instead of a simple “I don't know” or “let's explore this together” can shut down a

healthy source of striving for personal connection to the Divine. When students are asked what they want to learn about the most in the areas of religion, the topic of theodicy tops the list. This can either be a source of increased connection or, when not handled sensitively, of alienation. Also of

note, in a qualitative study of adolescent girls attending a Modern Orthodox Yeshiva high school, Shira Weiss found that tragedy was a major source of spiritual connection for the girls in her study.

Independence:

In a related sense, the adolescent's drive for independence necessitates a nuanced response to challenges from the teen regarding religious practice or beliefs. It is a mistake when an adolescent's search for an independent identity becomes intertwined with her religious obligations. When battles over prayer, dress or religious belief becomes the battleground upon which the drive for independence plays

out, connection to religion becomes confused with the adolescent's finding his or her voice. Learning which behaviors to judiciously ignore, and those which need to be dealt with in a calm, firm, yet unemotional manner, is an important component for educators seeking to nurture developmentally informed religious growth.

Social:

It is important that religious educators constantly keep in mind that the greatest fear of any adolescent is not fitting in. When surrounded by peers who are cynical or rejecting of religion, it is increasingly difficult to convince them to commit to any overt signs of religious or spiritual practice outside the established norm. Feeling different or attacked on the basis of religious behavior is a risk factor for spiritual alienation in young adulthood.

clearly viewed by peers as violating the social norm. Based on this experience, school administrators redesigned the program for the second cohort of students undergoing the immersive experience. The second time around, administrators carefully planned for students' re-entry to their high school. They were given strategies on how to handle their newfound spiritual connectedness against the developmental context of peer acceptance.

This dynamic was clear in one of the high schools participating in the RUACH project. When a small group of students returned from an intensive immersion program that helped them become more religiously connected than their peers, their re-entry to their school was complicated by the subtle message from their classmates that they seemed "over the top" in their clearly intensified spiritual prayer. Sadly, the reaction from their peers quickly taught these students to "tone down" any displays of their spiritual growth. Such activity was

“ I disconnect when criticized for my religious behaviors... it shouldn't be the business of other people...it's obnoxious and destructive.”

Gender and Age:

Gender differences in religious observance and beliefs have long been acknowledged in the literature, with women generally identified as being more religious than men. In his review of the findings of the World Values Survey, Stark (2002) reported that in 48 out of 49 nations surveyed, women were significantly more likely to describe themselves as religious than were men. Similar findings were found regarding adolescents in the United States, where female teens reported higher levels of religiosity in a wide range of religious actions and beliefs than males. In the RUACH project, when adolescents in six Modern Orthodox high schools were given a carefully standardized measure of their religious actions and beliefs, girls consistently scored higher on both actions and beliefs and showed more stability in their levels of religious and spiritual connection over the course of high school. In contrast, boys were significantly less spiritually mindful during high school and showed much more variability. They were particularly

at risk for showing a decline in both spiritual actions and belief at age 16.

Noting these differences in spiritual connection as a function of both gender and age is important when trying to understand how to intervene most effectively. It is likely that what works for girls is not necessarily what works for boys. For example, Jay Goldmintz reviews the literature on how adolescent girls connect to G-d during prayer in a more personal manner than do boys, who often related to G-d as judge and disciplinarian. The finding that girls during tefillah relate more to G-d as a confidante whereas boys relate to an authoritarian conception of G-d suggests different approaches to male and female prayer. Similarly, being prepared for a drop of religious connection during the sophomore or junior year, when students are mostly aged 16 to 17, can help educators more effectively plan for these grades in a manner that doesn't overreact to this temporary dip.

Parents - An Essential Partner:

Perhaps the most salient correlate of adolescent spirituality is what is modeled by parents and adult role models. Not surprisingly, studies reveal that the majority of adolescents in America follow in their parents' footsteps regarding religious and spiritual practices. When Jay Goldmintz surveyed over 200 adolescents attending Modern Orthodox day schools, levels of family cohesiveness and conflict were most

predictive of adolescent religious practices and beliefs. Clearly, educators will greatly increase their effectiveness in spiritual education if they forge effective partnerships with parents. This can include parent-child learning programs and spiritual retreats designed to encourage parents to join their children in exploring modes of spiritual connection and alienation.

Recommendations



The following are a summary of recommendations for Jewish educators to support the spiritual development of their students:

Create safe space to talk about G-d and belief

- ▶ Jews relative to other religions are not comfortable with G-d talk (NSYR—Soul Searching). Educators (and parents) need to become comfortable with talking with children about G-d.
- ▶ In *Soul Searching*, Charles Taylor suggests that “inarticulacy undermines the possibilities of reality.”

Examples of how and when to do this include:

- students and adults sharing stories before tefillah.
- faculty speaking about their own relationship with G-d and their own practice.
- write a letter to G-d.

Adult—student interactions. Adults need to be aware that:

- ▶ how questions of faith are handled can be a pathway to spiritual development or alienation.
- ▶ they are role models, whether actively or through “invisible modeling”.
- ▶ partner with parents to advance student connections to G-d.

Tefillah

- ▶ Develop alternative tefillah “space”—by using a “skeletal” davening, students can develop ownership over what they are saying and therefore be motivated to connect through prayer. The key is ownership and empowerment.
- ▶ For younger students, tefillah should be more of a discussion with G-d.
- ▶ Make prayer personal by saying Tehillim (Psalms) for an ill person—this should be initiated by students.
- ▶ Do not allow the conscientious objectors to create a space of cynicism in tefillah. Seat the non-performers distinctly from those who want to pray with seriousness and ardor.
- ▶ Fluency in tefillah can promote awareness—have students learn to lead prayer services.

Gratitude and Empathy

- ▶ Positive psychology, the discipline within psychology that focuses on values education and holistic personal growth, has much to offer the educator in terms of developing learning opportunities for our youth.
- ▶ Include exercises for students in the classroom on a regular basis in the areas of gratitude and empathy, as well as other dispositions/skills that can serve as connectors to the world beyond self.

Spreading the Spiritual

- ▶ Connect chesed and service learning to G-d/spirituality. Have students take initiative for these programs.
- ▶ Bring the spiritual into all subjects—within Judaic subjects and, if possible, beyond.

Half Shabbos: Empirical Research Shows the Whole Picture

The findings that appear below are drawn from the JewBALE (Jewish Beliefs Actions and Living Evaluation) which is a quantitative tool developed by Scott Goldberg, Ph.D. This quantitative measurement tool was employed at participating RUACH schools in addition to the qualitative measurement that appears above.

The JewBALE consists of over 100 questions asking students to describe the degree to which they agree with belief statements and the level to which they perform religious actions. We invite you to learn more about the development and content validity of the scale or learn more about the content, reliability, and participants in our survey at the bottom of this page.

We believe that our findings demand the collective attention of all individuals and organizations working with Jewish youth to support their religious development. Already, these issues drive our work with school leaders, teachers and students at Jewish day schools across North America to meaningfully connect religious beliefs to Jewish religious actions.

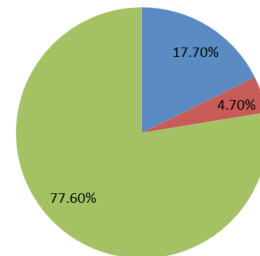
Our data about Jewish day school students, while far-ranging, has been particularly useful in terms of analysing a phenomenon that has been called 'half-Shabbos'. Our quantitative study has provided a clear window into the beliefs and actions of a representative sample of Jewish youth. These findings are relevant because they highlight the varying levels of disconnect between Jewish beliefs and Jewish actions in the lives of day school students.



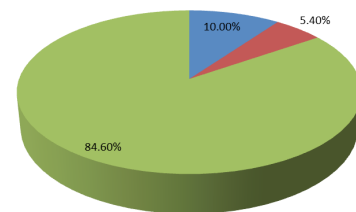
In particular, we have found that:

- 📱 17.7% of adolescents attending Modern Orthodox Yeshiva High Schools are texting on Shabbos
- 📱 12.2% of the students polled who report keep Shabbos in public, still text on Shabbos
- 📱 There are no differences between males and females when it comes to texting on Shabbos
- 📱 16-year-olds report texting the most on Shabbos
- 📱 13.5% also use cell phones on Shabbos
- 📱 15.5% go on the internet on Shabbos
- 📱 85% of the students surveyed attending Modern Orthodox schools keep Shabbos in public

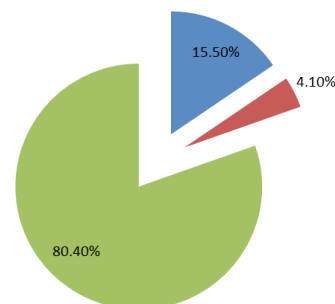
Texting on Shabbos



Public Violation of Shabbos



Internet on Shabbos



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Through these initiatives, we strive to improve the academic, behavioral, social, emotional, and religious outcomes for students in Jewish schools, develop more and better quality educators and lay leaders, and create a culture of research and innovation in the field.

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