Blog Post: Summer Camps and the “Boys Problem”

By Jacob Cytryn
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In his article “American Jewish Education in Historical Perspective,” Jonathan Sarna demonstrates the historical antecedents of the pressing issues facing Jewish Education at the turn of the millennium and encourages us to turn more often to our predecessors’ approaches. In a move that should surprise no one, this eminent scholar of American Judaism believes that we need not recreate the wheel in every generation.

It is within this context that I want, briefly, to turn our attention to the publication last fall of Engaging Jewish Teenage Boys: A Call to Action, by Moving Traditions. The report is part of an effort to help the Jewish community do a more effective job of engaging with male teenagers. It clearly articulates the stakes in the first paragraph of its Executive Summary:

The Jewish community is losing boys who drop out of Jewish life after bar mitzvah in unacceptably large numbers. Jewish institutions are struggling to keep teenage boys engaged. Left unaddressed, the trend threatens to undermine the Jewish future and leave a generation of boys ignorant of the wisdom, core values, community, and spiritual nourishment Judaism provides. (p. 3)

In line with Sarna’s recommendation to learn from the past, I suggest adding an important voice to the report and the discussion that preceded it (as reported on by JTA, here, and The Forward, here): that of an earlier “boys’ crisis,” with resonances for the secular and Jewish worlds today.

In Leslie Paris’s early history of American summer camping, Children’s Nature: The Rise of the American Summer Camp – a history informed substantially by the role of Jews and the development of Jewish summer camps – the difficulties of raising boys in the Victorian world play a prominent role. Evidently, the challenge of engaging young men is far from new, and, then as now, is not specific to the Jewish community. As presented by Paris, much of the philosophical framework and ideological impetus that informed the creation of the first camps was an attempt to provide some response to the “purportedly effeminizing influences of ‘civilization’” (p. 19).

One of the major intellectual contributors to early camps and late-19th century thinking about boys was G. Stanley Hall of Clark University, who saw children’s developmental stages as “recapitulations” of stages in the development of human civilization. Under his influence, professionals who worked with children “began reinterpreting gangs and pranks as healthy evidence of manly growth” as they posed the “question [of] how to direct boys’ energies in a direction susceptible to adult influence” (Paris, p. 28). Though much of Hall’s original theory about the development of civilizations is now anathema to our (more) modern sensibilities, the outcomes his acolytes implemented to solve the challenge that faced them are consistent with those suggested by Moving Traditions, specifically a number of the “seven principles for effectively engaging teenage boys,” including: “Honor the journey to manhood by
making issues of masculinity central to educational programming” and “Infuse Judaism throughout the program by presenting text, history, culture, and values in creative and engaging ways” (Moving Traditions, p. 18).

Paris’s work is of interest to those interested in an historical perspective on the challenges of raising young men to be engaged members of communities in the modern world, as well as its many other echoes of challenges the field of education – Jewish and secular – faces in the 21st century. Sarna’s directive to Jewish educators remains as relevant and unheeded as ever. I hope that his suggestion and Paris’s work can further elucidate the lessons the past can offer on our contemporary challenges.