

Discussion Notes

Did Bubbe Have a Bat Mitzvah? Unlocking the Power of Family Stories

While people were coming in, we took five minutes to respond to a few prompts about our own experiences and Jewish teens and as adults. If we had had more time, we may have gone into a discussion about any of these questions. All of these topics are good entry points for intergenerational conversations—they tend to generate a lot of follow-up questions.

Who was/were your role model/s?

- My high school advisor/English teacher
- My youth director—ran a large youth program, but allowed the teens to run many of the programs
- A teacher who was calm, centered, and kind
- My paternal grandmother—she lived by her own values and loved life
- Rabbi—charismatic, brilliant, articulate, confident authority figure
- Camp counselors and older teens
- Feminist activists
- My mom
- My friends

What do you like about being Jewish? (Afterward, I realized I should also have included: If you are not Jewish, what do you like about your faith/religion/culture?)

- Being part of a long, evolving tradition/chain
- Being part of USY
- Intellectual tradition that privileges critical inquiry
- I'm not Jewish but I greatly admire the history and culture
- Tradition/legacy of social justice activism
- Living in community
- Shabbat
- Family gathering
- Tradition
- Celebrating holidays
- Feeling like part of a community

As a tween/teen, what was your biggest fear/anxiety/worry?

- Being fat
- Not fitting in
- Public embarrassment (of any kind)
- That sense of negative self-awareness/judging would always be how it felt
- Social acceptance
- Not getting into college
- Having enough money to be an active teenager
- That I would live in conflict with my mother forever
- Being too petite

In a discussion, the group generated a long list of reasons why doing oral history with b'nai mitzvah age people might be meaningful/useful/important—in addition to the reasons in the program outline.

- Young people will see themselves as part of a tradition
 - Can look for similarities and differences between their own lives and those of the narrators
- Give them different perspectives on life
- Learn about old ways and traditions
- Learn the history/context for stories or traditions
- Provides an opportunity to set a *kavanah* or intention (“I’m going to be someone who listens”)
 - We must learn how to listen to others
 - We must nurture curiosity
 - A chance to learn about and think about others
- So much about teen experience is virtual/voyeuristic
 - Interviews are a chance to pursue curiosity in a way that is respectful and direct/face-to-face (rather than stalking on Facebook and making judgments)
- Learning not just about what someone did, but how they experience life, and how what they do makes them who they are

The group also came up with a few ideas for expanding oral history into concrete activities

- If you can’t interview relatives because they have passed away, you can do a text study or carry on another regular tradition in their memory
- A grandchild could interview grandparents about his/her parents bar/bat mitzvah or coming of age experiences
- Teens could interview older congregants about their lives and share with the community or congregation
- Interview 3 generations within the same family and then analyze the experiences/traditions/evolution
 - An example of this is the movie *Gefilte Fish*

Our group came up with four categories of people/questions that b'nai mitzvah students may want to interview. Then we generated questions that could be asked to each group.

Questions for Non-Jews

- What one value is most important to you and why?
- How, if at all, did your faith community influence the kind of person you have become?
- What was one coming of age experience for you?
- Do you believe in God? How do you know God is real?
- What does "God" mean to you?
- Has your understanding or belief in God changed as you've grown older? How is it different now? What caused the changes?
- What is/are the most important tradition/s in your family?
- Are there coming of age rituals in your religion/community/family/culture? What are they? What is their purpose?

Questions for older teens (high schoolers)

- What do you know now that would have helped you when you were 13?
- Are there things about middle school/earlier years of high school that you miss?
- What is the hardest thing you have ever done? How did you overcome the challenge/obstacle?
- What advice do you have for me? Or What advice do you have for me about [fill in subject/topic]?
- Did you like your bar/bat mitzvah? Why or why not?
- What was your worst thing/decision when you were 13?

Questions for anyone that aren't about Judaism

- Can you tell me about a turning point in your life? What was it like? What led up to it?
- Are there things you wish you had known when you were my age? What are they?
- Who helped you when you had problems? Who did you talk to for advice or guidance?
- What is the best advice you have ever received?
- What makes a good friend?
- Have you ever made a big mistake? What was it like? Did you do anything to make it right?
- Can you tell me one of your funniest memories?
- Have you ever been on an adventure? What was it like?
- What is one thing that you would like to do in the future? Why?

Questions for college students

- Do you think of yourself as an adult? Why or why not?
- What makes you feel like an adult?
- What makes you feel that you aren't yet an adult?
- Do you miss any Jewish celebrations or activities now that you are at college?
- How observant are you at college? How has your practice of Judaism changed (if at all) since you have been in college?
- How has your relationship with your parent(s) changed since going to college?
- How have you experienced or participated in Jewish life since you have been in college?
- How do you make important decisions? Who do you ask/talk to?
- What is it like to plan/think about entering "the world" after college?
- How would you compare the way you felt on the last day of high school to the way you felt the first day of college.
- How did you decide what to study? What is the biggest factor you take into account when choosing what to study?
- What is the most challenging thing socially about being in college? What is the most challenging thing academically about being in college?
- Does the experience of being in college meet your expectations? Why or Why not?