

Raising Jewish Boys

What will they stand for? Who will they stand with?

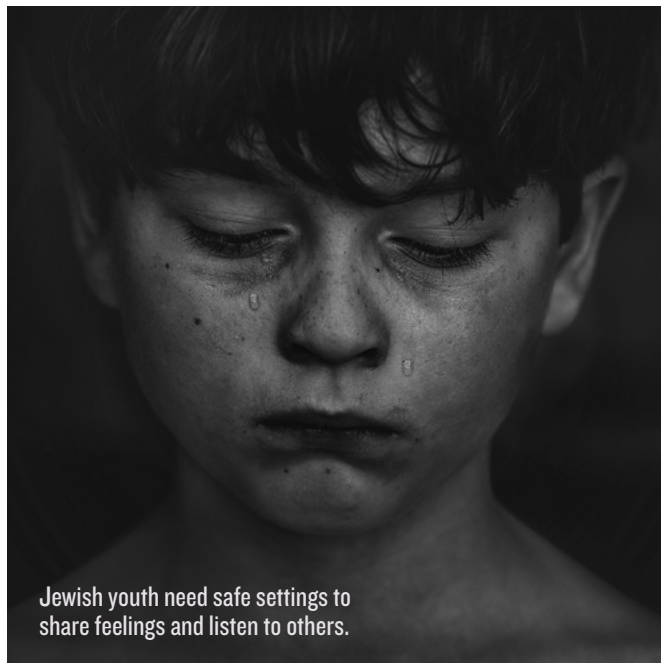
PAUL KIVEL

ACT LIKE A MAN! GROW UP! BE A MAN! What are the messages Jewish boys in the U.S. receive about what it means to act like a man? Many of the messages are the ones most American boys hear.

Be tough, aggressive, in charge, strong, successful, independent, athletic, don't cry, don't show your feelings, don't make mistakes, and don't ever ask for help. The bottom line expectation is you should never be vulnerable, you should always be in control.

Of course, some of the messages Jewish boys hear are more typically "Jewish" although what it means to be Jewish varies widely. What messages do boys receive in an orthodox community in Brooklyn, a reform community in the suburbs of Los Angeles, a Sephardic community in Chicago, a renewal community in Berkeley, or a conservative community in Dallas? What do they have in common? I think the messages have two things in common, even though there is much overall particularity. The first message is: even though you're Jewish and shouldn't beat any-

one up, you should still to be in control. Most Jewish boys are taught to control their bodies, control their feelings, control their tempers, and as they become adults to control their children and their partners.



Jewish youth need safe settings to share feelings and listen to others.

There are many ways to be in control and our different sub-cultures value these differently. Depending upon culture and community Jewish boys are taught to use verbal tools, emotional skills, intellectual acumen, physical strength, financial success, and sexual manipulation to remain in control. Control is the goal.

They are also given the expectation that men should be in charge. Through Jewish tradition and current practice, through both mainstream Christian and traditional Jewish cultural norms, men are expected to be superior to, more important than, and in control of women. There are exceptions to these expectations in individual families and a few Jewish congregations. But overall the pattern is stark and clear. Throughout the Tanakh and later



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Jewish texts men are the decision-makers and women have lesser roles. They are generally visible as the wives, daughters, sisters, or seducers of powerful men. These texts convey the message that men are superior to women and therefore should be in charge. A sense of entitlement, coupled with a view of Jewish women as inferior or less than men leads some Jewish men to take out any anger, confusion, frustration, or pain they feel on the Jewish women and children around them. These abusive acts are then sometimes spiritually sanctioned through reference to religious texts, or emotionally sanctioned by male portrayals of shrill, controlling Jewish women conveyed by contemporary Jewish and mainstream literature.

At the same time we have an image of the Jewish man as a *mensch*, a good and caring person, a thinker or scholar, as someone who is more passive than aggressive, perhaps even unable to defend himself. Because of these stereotypes the Jewish community continues to be in great denial about the high levels of incest, sexual assault, sexual harassment, and domestic violence committed by Jewish men. There is a presumption of innocence given to Jewish men. Because of these stereotypes and the presumption of innocence we often fail to talk about family and relationship violence or to counter the negative messages our sons receive about Jewish women. We fail to prepare them—regardless of their sexual orientation—to be non-violent, equal, and respectful lovers, partners, and parents.

Many Jewish boys grow up in families where they experience incest, physical abuse, emotional and physical neglect, or witness domestic violence. Some Jewish boys grow up to be men who perpetrate these kinds of abuse on

others. And yet most of us do not talk about issues of violence and relationships with our sons either at home, in religious school and Bar-mitzvah settings, or in youth programs. We are setting them up to be in abusive relationships because they will lack the skills to work out life's challenges without controlling potentially abusive behavior.

How can boys resist the messages to be tough, competitive, and in control? As adults, we need to be willing to talk with them about issues of

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abuse—issues of abuse in our own lives, in our families, in the Jewish community, and abuse in Israel (where a militarized society has led to high levels of domestic violence and sexual assault in addition to the

normalization of violence directed at Palestinians and others). We need to engage them in discussions of what it means to be powerful in ways that do not involve control or violence. We can also teach them how to express their feelings, listen to and nurture others, and how to solve conflict without violence. We need to help them think about what it means to enter into right relationship with others, particularly women—relationships based on respect, mutuality, reciprocity, and equality. In this task we can draw on traditional Jewish beliefs which value peace in the home, honoring one's neighbors, and justice for all. We can encourage our boys to see themselves as an ally to those around them—not as a hero or savior, or as an act of charity—but as a member of the community who reaches out to those abused and challenges those who are abusive from an understanding of our mutual interest and interdependence.

We cannot afford a presumption of innocence for our boys. They see images in the media

and in daily life of toxic masculinity extolling control, violence, and dominance over women. They are confused about their roles, unsure about how they should act. They are eager for us to initiate discussions with them about these issues. They do not need us to lecture them about our values, they need help thinking critically about what is going on in our communities and support determining their own values. They also need help in coming together with other Jewish youth, in safe settings, to share feelings, listen to others, and explore these issues.

Many of us in the Jewish community are concerned about how our sons will become good men with good values. We want to be proud of what they stand for. But we also have to be concerned about who they stand with. Without a grounding in Jewish values and a firm sense of their role as an ally to children, to women, to other men, to those who are gender non-conforming, and to all those marginalized in our communities they run the risk of becoming one of the significant number of Jewish men who are abusive to others and destructive of our community life. We need to ask not only what will they stand for, but also who will they stand with. In doing so we will become allies to them so they can become allies to others. ●



PAUL KIVEL is an educator, parent, writer, and social justice activist and can be reached at paul@paulkivel.com or www.paulkivel.com.

RESOURCES

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The Courage to Raise Good Men: You Don't Have to Sever the Bond with Your Son to Help Him Become a Man by Olga Silverstein & Beth Rashbaum. Penguin Books, 1994.

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"How to Raise a Boy" by Will Leitch and other articles at <https://www.thecut.com/2018/03/will-leitch-on-raising-sons-in-2018.html>.

"Love: All That and More" (video, 66 minutes) Faithtrust Institute, 2001.

Young Men's Work: Stopping Violence & Building Community by Allan Creighton and Paul Kivel. Hazelden, 1998.