



Raising Jewish Boys

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

by **Paul Kivel**

ACT LIKE A MAN! GROW UP! BE A MAN! What are the messages that Jewish American boys receive about what it means to act like a man. Many of the messages they receive are the ones that 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 American 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 anyone 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.

There are many ways to be in control and our different subcultures value these differently. Depending upon their 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. But control is the goal.

They are also given the expectation that men should be in charge. Through Jewish tradition and present 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. Of course, in individual families and a few Jewish congregations there are exceptions to these expectations. But overall the pattern is stark and clear. Throughout the Bible and other Jewish texts men are the decision-makers and women have lesser roles. When they are visible it is because they are wives, daughters, sisters, or seducers of powerful men. Most Jewish men



receive the message that men are superior to women and that men are entitled to 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 may feel on the Jewish women 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 in contemporary Jewish and mainstream literature.

But at the same time we have an image of the Jewish man as a *mensch*, as a thinker, as a 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 violence in relationships or to counter the negative messages our sons receive about Jewish women. We fail to prepare them to be non-violent, equal and respectful lovers, partners, and parents.

Jewish boys grow up in families where they experience incest, physical abuse, emotional and physical neglect, and witness domestic violence. Some Jewish boys grow up to be men who perpetrate these kinds of abuse on others. And yet many of us do not talk about issues of violence and relationships with our sons either at home or 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 violence.

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



respecting one's partner. We can encourage our boys to see themselves as an ally to those around them, a member of the community who reaches out to those abused and challenges those who are abusive.

We cannot afford a presumption of innocence for our boys. They see the mainstream and Jewish messages about what men are supposed to be like and how they should treat women. They see the glamorization of violence and the objectification of people in the media and in daily life. 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 in thinking critically about these issues and determining their own values. They also need help in coming together with other Jewish youth, both male and female, in safe settings, to share feelings, listen to others, and explore these issues.

I think that many of us in the Jewish community are concerned about the values of our sons. We want to raise good men with good values. We want to be proud of what they stand for. But we also have to be concerned about whom 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 all those less fortunate than they are, 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 whom will they stand with? In doing so we will become allies to them so that they can become allies to others.



Resources

Boys Will Be Men: Raising Our Sons for Courage, Caring, and Community by Paul Kivel. New Society Publishers, 1999.

Bullyproof: A Teacher's Guide on Teasing and Bullying for Use with Fourth and fifth Grade Students by Nan Stein. 1996.

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.

Flirting or Hurting?: A Teachers' Guide on Student-to-Student Sexual Harassment in Schools (Grades 6-12) by Nan Stein. The Wellesley Centers for Women, 1994.

Helping Teens Stop Violence: A Practical Guide for Counselors, Educators, and Parents by Allan Creighton with Paul Kivel. Hunter House Publishers, 1992.

"Love: All That and More" (video, 66 minutes) Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence, 2001.

Love Shouldn't Hurt: Building Healthy Relationships for Jewish Youth. A dating violence prevention and healthy relationships program. Oakland: Shalom Bayit, 2006.

Making the Peace: A 15-Session Violence Prevention Curriculum by Paul Kivel and Allan Creighton. Hunter House Publishers, 1997.

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