If Jewish life were Twitter, youth engagement would definitely be a trending topic. It is an absorbing concern for many leaders, clergy, and professionals. A simple Google search for Jewish youth engagement returns close to 500,000 entries. It is the cause for new jobs across North America. So important is the subject that it is the focus of a URJ campaign and conference and the impetus for community partnerships and collaboration initiatives\(^1\). Youth engagement attracts time, attention, and capital. Without a doubt, youth engagement has reached its “tipping point”, and is no longer just a trend, but prevailing, rampant issue.\(^2\)

Youth engagement is the prevalent survivalist fear in the American Jewish community’s ongoing narrative about continuity. Each generation of Jews tackles the challenge of how to sustain Jewish life and raise a new generation of active and committed Jewish people. In fact, historians may one day point to the 2013 Pew report to encapsulate this generation’s angst. The report raised alarm in many Jewish communal quarters with countless articles and blog posts being published on the dire fate of American Jewry. One of the most troubling statistics for commentators was that 32% of Jews in the Millennial Generation, those born between 1982 – 2004\(^3\), described themselves as Jewish “on the basis of ancestry, ethnicity, or culture,”\(^4\) not religion. After the report was published, the call to action about engaging our youth seemed louder than ever.

Despite its increasing profile, youth engagement remains a relatively emerging topic, with scholarly sources only beginning to shape Jewish professionals’ approaches to this work. Long time scholar of Jewish education and the key architect of the curriculum behind Birthright Israel Barry Chazan, provides context for how we can begin to interpret and understand youth movements, one type of informal Jewish education (IJE). From Chazan, we learn that youth engagement, like the broad field of IJE, is unique in its emphasis placed on the role of community, leading to a distinctive approach of teaching and learning subject matter through *shared experiences as a group process*. Chazan declares that youth engagement efforts have reached a prominent place, asserting that IJE, and thus youth engagement is “ready to assume a major new educational role in twenty first century Jewish life”.

Lee S. Shulman, Stanford University Professor Emeritus of Education, also provides important implications for youth professionals in his essay *Teaching Alone, Learning Together*. Although he is speaking to teachers, his arguments for the importance of teacher collaboration extend to the field of youth work. Specifically, he argues that planning, reflection, and review in the company of others are “absolutely necessary for teaching to be at its highest level.” So too, is it impossible for youth workers to be successful without this kind of conscious, explicit and public collaborative work. For the purpose of this discussion, I define collaboration as a team work strategy involving working with others to think and create. Indeed, conscious and deep collaboration emerges as a core requisite in effective youth engagement.

Shulman’s call for collaboration is echoed by leaders of the field. For example, Rabbi Bradley Solmsen, URJ Director of Youth Engagement, points to collaboration as one of the

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essential ingredients in a successful youth engagement strategy.\textsuperscript{7} Among the many skills and qualities that Solmsen identifies as being most vital for youth workers to be successful in their jobs, the ability to work as a team ranks high.

While each generation of Jews may have to face these matters of best practices in engagement, today’s youth present unprecedented challenges demanding new solutions. Teenagers today are busier than ever. It is these busy schedules, which can serve as a roadblock to engagement.\textsuperscript{8} Jewish youth programming becomes only one of a variety of options available to today’s teens. Add to this the enormous pressure that teens are under, constantly thinking about grades and college.\textsuperscript{8} Our teenagers have been pushed to their breaking points by over scheduling, extreme pressure and the constant need to succeed and achieve.\textsuperscript{9}

However, creating and sustaining partnerships between participants and adults can help break down these barriers, and add value to the organization and the experience. In fact, the merit of facilitating connections between all parties involved is exponential. URJ youth professional Spencer Hirsch emphasizes this principle best, asserting that “to engage the youth that aren’t currently engaged, we need to engage the relationships that don’t currently exist.”\textsuperscript{9}

One example of this could be a mentorship program between a teen youth board and their counterparts on the temple’s board of directors. Or there could be a program run in tandem between youth and adults. If a teenager is interested in film or medicine, the youth worker could find an adult in the congregation who works in those fields. The conversation about youth engagement needs to include how to create these connections and provide opportunities for engagement. With teenagers so busy and overscheduled they need relationships and

\textsuperscript{7} B. Solmsen, URJ Director of Youth Engagement, personal communication, November 21, 2014.
\textsuperscript{8} S. Hirsch, NFTY Southern California Regional Director, personal communication, December 1, 2014
\textsuperscript{9} Race To Nowhere [Motion picture on laser disc]. (2011). Reel Link Films.
programming that is meaningful for them. When these relationships are done right, they can add value to teens as whole people. Fostering these relationships is the key to beginning to break down the barriers that prevent youth from participating.

The good news is that the conversation around collaboration is already occurring across the field. Thus far, however, the dialogue has centered primarily around peer-to-peer relationships, be it networking between colleagues or building a community of active teens. Indeed, the recently established Reform Youth Professional Association speaks to the importance of cohort learning and networking. To be sure, bringing together colleagues creates opportunities for shared learning, enabling best practices to emerge, but these relationships are only one piece of the engagement puzzle. Thinking in terms of intra-cohort relationships is extremely limiting. We need connections across the board – between teens and staff, clergy, leadership, lay leaders and stakeholders in each and every combination. These connections will help sustain and strengthen programs. It is through these relationships that true engagement can happen. Successful youth engagement strategies take into consideration the role of both adults and teens involved. Moreover, these relationships reach far beyond the personal satisfaction they can bring. They have much broader institutional effects. They can make congregations happier, richer places to live and learn.

The relationships that are being formed between professionals and organizations have the power to enable professionals to imagine together and pool resources to collaborate and produce a working pedagogy of best practices and solutions. The recent partnership between BBYO and NFTY speaks to the importance of these opportunities for collaboration. The organizations have

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begun to work together by bringing teen leaders together to brainstorm best practices\textsuperscript{11} for their work and to implement joint programming.\textsuperscript{12}

Today, youth engagement efforts take place in a context of “coop-etition.” Though competing for members, to be successful they must work in collaboration to engage a network of colleagues. Relationships between teens and programs are only half of the equation; equally important are those built between teens and adults in a community. Neither can sustain a program on its own. Rather, it is these components, applied in tandem, which will allow a program (and teen!) to reach their full potential and stimulate future engagement efforts. The construction of these networks and partnerships will be vital as this new but active field helps provide a brighter future for the next generation of the Jewish people.
