

On the Making of a Mensch in the 21st Century

A PARENT'S VIEW

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When raising children, many important concerns confront parents in the contemporary Jewish community. Some of these are uniquely Jewish concerns and have garnered headlines with phrases such as 'Jewish Continuity' or 'Youth at Risk,' and every parent hopes to assure that such issues will not directly affect their family. Other concerns relate to transmitting specific skills. We learn that *pekuach nefesh*—the saving of a life—is a high virtue in Jewish tradition, yet where will our children learn age-appropriate skills in first aid and lifesaving? Assuring that a son has skills to earn a living is a Talmudic obligation upon a father, yet where will our children have a chance to explore vocational, or avocational, opportunities? Other concerns relate to character-building and having our children develop self-esteem, self-reliance, confidence, discipline, respect, and the ability to work in a group. Last, but not least, parents have a deep concern for building a lifelong parent-child bond of mutual understanding and sharing. If we can address all of these concerns when raising children, we will have gone far toward the making of a mensch.

Our schools do an excellent job in many areas of education, but few schools can claim programs that address all of these concerns. Rather than viewing this situation as a 'burden' for parents, this may be an 'opportunity.' Immediately, some may equate the suggestion of a new 'opportunity' with a new 'cost.' If so, how much 'cost' are parents prepared to bear to supplement and complement their child's formal education—while addressing all of the concerns raised above, and more? Would they spend two or three hours a week? The cost of addressing the concerns raised

above is not measured in units of money, but in units of time.

If, G-d forbid, a child gets sick, parents invariably make time to go to doctors and hospitals to assure a speedy recovery. The same commitment to 'make time' needs to be generated in a proactive approach to addressing the concerns raised above. 'Making time' to help our children establish a *derech*—a direction that they should follow down the path of life—is no less important than maintaining their physical health.

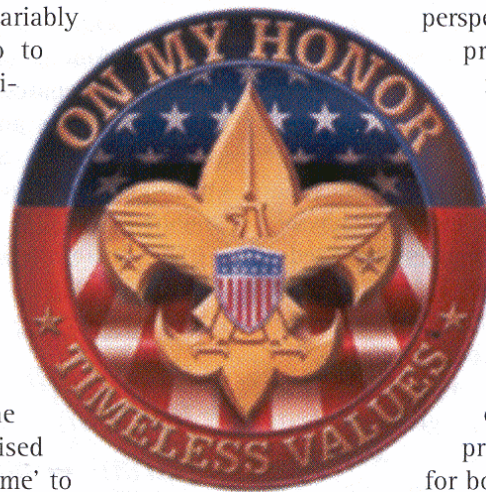
In the Torah, we read of the first time in Jewish history when a *derech* was accepted and followed by *Bnai Yisrael*, at Mount Sinai. There, the response of the people was "Naaseh V'Nishma—we will do and we will obey" (Shemot 24:7). The observation that this response focuses primarily on the physical action of 'doing' and then secondarily on the cerebral act of 'obeying,' resonates well with the modern educational perspective on 'experiential learning.' With this perspective, we may now look for age-appropriate programs that are fun for our youth, involves them in a wide variety of experiential learning opportunities, addresses all of the above concerns, and requires parents to commit only a few hours of time each week. This is not an impossible task!

A number of synagogues, *yeshivas*, or Hebrew day schools have found that superb programs have already been designed to meet this need. All that they have had to do is become a 'charter organization' to host these

programs of the Boy Scouts of America in their own environment and with their own religious perspective. Through this process, they have received much support from Scouting professionals and volunteers as well as access to a wealth of program resources, camps and other physical facilities, and insurance coverage. These exciting programs are designed for boys from age 6 to 21, with separate programs available for girls from age 14 to 21.

Torah institutions with Scouting programs have been well-served by the Boy Scouts policy on religion, which states: "The Boy Scouts of America maintains that no member can grow into the best kind of citizen without recognizing an obligation to G-d and, therefore, recognizes the religious element in the training of the member, but is absolutely nonsectarian in its attitude toward that religious training. The Boy Scouts of America's policy is that the home and the organization or group with which the member is connected shall give definite attention to religious life." The 'charter organization' may therefore set whatever standards it desires in areas such as the observance of *Kashrut*—kosher food, *Tefila*—prayer, *Shabbat*—the Sabbath, and *Limudei Kodesh*—Jewish learning. Furthermore, the charter organization selects all adult leaders to assure appropriate adult role models for their youth.

On the local level, many *Shomer Shabbat* Scout troops across America go camping with two complete sets of pots for meat and dairy cooking. When preparing and cooking all of



their food, Scouts get experiential learning in Kashrut. When camping on a weekend, Scouts get experiential learning in Shabbat—especially eruv. When the sun rises and sets, Scouts get experiential learning in Tefila—led by the Scouts. When Limudei Kodesh is done outdoors, it becomes a new experience—with superb results.

On the regional and national level, the Boy Scouts have a 14,000 acre reservation in New York State where one of the five summer camps on the property, Camp Kunatah, has a 'Star-K' certified dining hall and a fully appointed synagogue with a resident Orthodox Jewish Chaplain to the boys. This Jewish infrastructure is supported by the Greater New York Council Jewish Committee on Scouting and many Jewish Scout troops from across America attend this camp.

A new Scouting program, implemented by bochorim and rabbeim from the Ner Israel Rabbinical College in Baltimore, has a formal 'learning seder' every morning after breakfast at Camp Kunatah, and again in the evening. This program, known as 'Keshar Scouting,' links each Scout with a 'learning rebbe' to build a close keshar—connection. Each learning rebbe is also trained as a Scout leader. This Scouting program has attracted yeshiva boys from across the nation and it will even have a Masmidim Program this summer, where high-school age boys will learn with a rebbe all morning before heading off for a full afternoon of Scouting fun. In implementing this Scouting program, many questions were asked of a number of rabbeim including Rabbi Moshe Eisemann, Mashgiach Ruchani of the Ner Israel Rabbinical College. These rabbeim strongly support this 'Keshar Scouting' implementation of the program of the Boy Scouts of America.

The National Jewish Committee on Scouting (NJCS) provides a number of programs and services to Jewish Scouts. In the Jewish Emblems Program, for example, the Maccabee, Aleph, Ner Tamid, and Etz Chaim emblems offer age-appropriate challenges for Jewish youth age 7–21. The Rabbi or teacher who serves as a

counselor may use these requirements to 'stretch' the Jewish learning and understanding of every Scout—no matter what their level of formal Jewish education. With a goal of wearing the medal on their uniform, Scouts work eagerly in responding to these challenges in Jewish learning. Furthermore, the NJCS administers a college scholarship program for Scouts who have earned these emblems. Among other activities, the NJCS also prepares Jewish Chaplains for Scout Camps and Jamborees, and supports "The Shomer Shabbat Contingent" of youth to National Jamborees.

The Scouting program has three

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main components—Cub Scouts, Boy Scouts, and Venturing—each of which has fun, age-appropriate, activities that can very effectively supplement and complement the formal education of every Jewish youth. Parents volunteer to fill various leadership roles in running a Cub Scout Pack, Boy Scout Troop, or Venturing Crew, and the Boy Scouts of America has excellent, highly focussed, training videotapes and hands-on workshops to prepare any parent for a productive role that suits their skills, talents, and interests.

Cub Scouting is for boys in grade 1 through 5 (age 6 to 10). Boys meet weekly in small Den Meetings of 6 to 8 boys to work on projects, crafts, and skits, relating to a monthly theme. All of the grade-specific Dens join together for a monthly Pack Meeting where each den presents their work toward the monthly theme, and boys are presented with any badges that they have earned. Meetings typically last about an hour. As parents volunteer to fill various leadership roles, it is notable how boys invariably respond well to

working with parents of their peers. It never ceases to amaze parents how the relationship with their own son improves when he can observe the high regard that his peers have for the role being served by his own parents.

Boy Scouting is for boys in grade 6 through 12 (age 11 to 18). A Boy Scout Troop is composed of Patrols of 6 to 8 boys. All Patrols join together for weekly Troop Meetings that last about an hour and a half. Older Scouts, age 14 to 18, gain extensive leadership experience as they plan and run these meetings. Parents volunteer to fill a variety of leadership roles, such as offering guidance and support to the Junior Leaders, offering logistical support for transporting boys to events such as overnight camping trips, and assuring health and safety issues in all activities.

The Scouts have excellent week-long leadership training programs—one for youth and another for adults. With parents volunteering to fill various leadership roles, many have commented that the leadership training they received in Scouting has even been very beneficial for them in their jobs. Parents have a chance to be a 'fly-on-the-wall' watching their children grow up with increasing leadership responsibilities—close enough to observe, but far enough away to allow youth their space. There are thus many opportunities to appropriately compliment their child, or constructively problem-solve leadership issues together with their child. This offers a wonderful construct to facilitate the growth of a parent-child bond of mutual understanding and sharing.

Scouting is a fun and educational program that clearly utilizes 'experiential learning' — learning-by-doing. It motivates and involves our youth in many enjoyable and challenging activities that contribute to wholesome development. In Scouting, there is no focus on competition against others—with winners and losers. Both the outdoor environment, and Scouting's Advancement Program, present 'standard challenges' to all participants. The Scouting Advancement Program offers a ladder

of skills for youth to climb at their own pace. As skills are mastered, they eagerly rise through a series of ranks for which they are awarded badges. The higher they climb the more challenging, and rewarding, the tasks.

Across the Advancement Program's scope, parallels may often be drawn to Jewish issues. Thus, in cooperation with the Jewish Education Service of North America, the National Jewish Committee on Scouting has developed a series of supplemental Jewish program resources to augment the regular Boy Scouts of America program materials.

The outdoors is what some call the 'miracle ingredient' in Scouting. Today, we do not generally need to know how to cook over an open fire, or which species of wood burns the hottest. But, where else do our youth get to have control over their environment—aside from the surreal world of computer games? Scouting offers a chance to understand, to interact with, and to shape, the real world—the outdoor world that G-d created.

Today, youth-group leaders, teachers, and sports coaches, constantly dream up artificial ways to challenge and excite our youth. There is nothing more real than living in the outdoors—in desert and forest, from sea level to over 14,000 feet—and being in control of your response to the vagaries of G-d's topography, plants, wildlife, ...and G-d's ever-changing weather.

Living outdoors, as part of a well-led team, is the crucible for developing self-esteem, self-reliance, confidence, discipline, respect, and critical skills in teamwork. Living outdoors, with Jewish Scouting—observing Kashrut, Tefila, Shabbat, and Limudei Kodesh—yields incomparable skills in Jewish self-sufficiency.

Experiential learning for the outdoors includes using a knife and ax, a map and compass, rope, knots, lashings, campfires, and backpacking stoves. Youth learn about preparing and cooking food, first aid and emergency preparedness, swimming and lifesaving, nature, hiking, cycling, rowing, and canoeing. There is a focus on health and physical fitness, citizen-

ship—in the world, a country, a community, and a family. The Scouting Advancement Program also offers boys an opportunity to explore a variety of vocations and avocations with appropriate adult role models serving as Merit Badge Counselors for more than 120 different Merit Badges.

As our boys progress in their Scouting skills, their ongoing involvement allows them to gain valuable leadership experience—and training. These skills are important to learn and to practice, for along with earning 21 Merit Badges, 'showing leadership' is a requirement to earn the coveted Eagle Scout Award. It is truly impressive to watch our boys thrive and have fun with these Scouting challenges. They learn, achieve, and mature—and wear

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their badges proudly on their Scout uniform.

With basic Scouting skills mastered, Scouts or Venturers can safely enjoy the challenges of rappelling over a cliff, or scaling a climbing wall, as well as mountain biking over an extensive network of backwoods trails. They can enjoy building a 'wilderness survival' shelter in the woods and sleeping in it, or even backcountry skiing up into the White Mountains of New Hampshire to build snow shelters in which they sleep comfortably with temperatures far below freezing outside. Cooking a multi-course dinner over a campfire to serve to friends is truly fun, especially if they have just done whitewater canoeing on one of America's wild rivers. Or, maybe they are cooking while out on a 5-day 50-mile hike, a 6-day 68-mile horseback trek in the Colorado Rockies, or a ten-day backpacking trek on the 137,000 acre Philmont Scout Ranch in the mountains of New Mexico. All of these

activities have recently been done by Shomer Shabbat Scouts.

The Venturing program in Scouting is designed for youth age 14 to 21. It may be co-ed, or it may be implemented as an all-boys, or all-girls, program. Recently, several Shomer Shabbat, all-girls, Venturing Crews have been chartered to Torah institutions to allow Jewish girls to be prepared to experience the same type of high-adventure opportunities. For these activities, the Scouts supply facilities, the technical equipment, safety training for the adults and youth, experienced and knowledgeable guides, and insurance coverage.

When implemented with the support of parents in a Shomer Mitzvot environment, and in cooperation with a formal educational program, these Scouting experiences offer a construct for addressing all of the concerns raised above in a most positive manner. Youth involved in these programs strengthen their bond with their own religious observance, with their Jewish community, and with their family. Parents, involved with their youth in these programs, can go a very long way towards helping to make a *men-sch* in the 21st Century.

If interested in starting a Shomer Mitzvot Scouting program in your community, contact Mr. Bradley Karasik, Director of Youth Services and Programming at the National Council of Young Israel (212) 929-1525 Ext 286.

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