



THE LATER YEARS

Leadership: It's a Girl Thing, Too!

Beth Cooper Benjamin

This thoughtfully-designed expansion of *Rosh Hodesh: It's a Girl Thing!* for the high school years is a gift to our daughters, to our community, and to the world these girls will soon inherit. And it couldn't have come at a better time. As a researcher, I have come to believe that the ability to think and act as a leader is a crucial skill set for adolescents, and one that has particular relevance for Jewish girls. But understanding what makes leadership “a girl thing” requires us to take a closer look at what leadership means and what it does.

In the past several years, leadership has become a major focus in single-sex programs for girls. In my research, I've learned about summer “institutes” where girls can gain leadership skills in residential settings at women's colleges or the homes of illustrious women leaders of old. I've found leadership programs run by single-sex private schools and programs to encourage girls' leadership in developing countries. In 2006, the Girl Scouts of the U.S.A.—by far the largest and best-known girl-serving organization in this country—announced that they were redesigning their entire program model to focus on girls' leadership. And now, the Jewish community has a leadership program for our own girls, an extension of Moving Traditions' groundbreaking *Rosh Hodesh: It's a Girl Thing!* into the all-important high school years.

Through my research, I've encountered as many images and definitions of leadership as there are leaders. Certainly within girls' programming there is no consensus to say what leadership is, what purposes it should serve, and why it matters. But my own work has shown me that it does matter, deeply, and that leadership training has particular value and relevance for the community of Jewish girls—the next generation of Jewish women leaders.

In most settings and even many girls' leadership programs, leadership seems, essentially, to mean getting people to do what you want them to do. When most of us think about leaders, we picture the person at the front of the room, the one holding the gavel or the scepter or standing at the podium or on the bimah. But from where I stand, this definition of leadership is too broad, and these images too narrow. For Jews, in particular, with our history rife with persecution at the hands of powerful individuals and institutions, a value-neutral definition of leadership just seems insufficient.

Ronald Heifetz, leadership scholar and professor at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, provides an alternative vision of leadership that is inherently value-laden. Refuting the notion of leadership as simply convincing others to follow you, Heifetz defines leadership as “influencing the community to face its problems.” By this definition,

Beth Cooper Benjamin, EdD, is Senior Associate at Ma'yan: The Jewish Women's Project, a Program of the JCC in Manhattan. She has worked extensively with single-sex programs for girls, both as a researcher and a practitioner, and has consulted with Jewish and secular girl-serving organizations. She received her doctorate in Human Development and Psychology from the Harvard University Graduate School of Education, where her dissertation research examined the definition and practice of girls' leadership in an affluent, suburban, adolescent Girl Scout troop.

what we often think of as leadership—being “in charge”—amounts to just plain authority, or worse, unchecked power. By Heifetz’s definition, leadership

is grounded in action, not in a particular role or position, and thus anyone can act as a leader, and many leaders can (and often must) work together towards a common goal. Though the specific “problems” that leadership activities tackle may not be lofty or grand, whether in a girls’ leadership program or a boardroom or the halls of justice, leadership demands that we stay honest about the problems our communities face and what it will take to pursue reparation and justice. In this way, all leadership is the work of *tikkun olam*: our commandment to “repair the world.”



Av

It is clear that Moving Traditions shares this vision of leadership as a crucial tool in the struggle for social justice. For this curriculum, they have devised some ingenious strategies to cultivate what Nancy Gruver, publisher of *New Moon* magazine, calls “natural feminism”: girls’ sensitivity to injustice that begins, often, with the assertion that something is “not fair!” For girls growing up with material and social advantages—as is true for many in the United States, and in some sectors of the Jewish community in particular—it can be challenging to convey how inequality works to make life harder for some while clearing paths for others. Because privilege operates by removing obstacles, it can be very difficult for those who have it to recognize its presence. And yet (in part because of these same advantages) many girls in the Jewish community are destined for futures full of authority and influence. Without the tools to recognize injustice, girls will be hard-pressed to act as effective leaders when they find themselves in positions of influence and power.

In my favorite exercise of this *Rosh Hodesh: It’s a Girl Thing!* curriculum, a “Chutes and Ladders” style board game in Kol year’s Nisan gathering enables girls to experience the whims of structural inequalities—and rewards those who bring others along with them when they are able to advance. Despite making these deep and painful cultural divisions the focus for girls’ play, the exercise remains substantive and respectful, never trivializing the lived experience of oppression and poverty. It’s subversive in the best possible sense, in keeping with the long tradition of Jewish women’s activism and subversive resistance.

Which brings me to what I believe is the other great gift of this new curriculum: how it invites girls to learn from and to enter into the richness of Jewish women’s activism, both past and present. As in the original *Rosh Hodesh: It’s a Girl Thing!* program, girls here are introduced to a wide community of women and girls who have used their voices, their talents, and their resources to make a better world. Moreover, these leaders are presented as real flesh-and-blood individuals, not untouchable heroes and gods to be revered but not questioned. In another exercise, girls are invited to consider how they might act faced with the same ethical dilemmas that their foremothers faced. This activity is perfectly pitched to engage teens’ growing capacity to tolerate contradiction and complexity; one example challenges girls to consider various barriers to speaking out for a cause, encouraging girls to identify equally with outspoken activists and with those who chose to remain silent.

Given their evident talents and their uncommon advantages, I believe that this generation of Jewish girls will be called upon to lead throughout their lives in countless capacities and contexts. What I wish, for them and for us, is that they will meet these leadership opportunities as skilled communicators, critical and complex thinkers, effective planners, creative visionaries, and passionate activists committed to pursuing social justice. It's a tall order, no doubt, but the problems of our world are profound, and meeting them demands ambition and audacity. That kind of boldness doesn't always come easily to girls, who are still expected to be "nice" even as we push them to achieve. This new *Rosh Hodesh: It's a Girl Thing!* program creates a safe space for girls to develop these skills and capacities, to challenge themselves and to tolerate being challenged by others, and to begin to recognize that leadership is a girl thing, too. If Ron Heifetz is right, if leadership is an action taken to help a community face its problems, then becoming involved with *Rosh Hodesh: It's a Girl Thing!*—as a parent enrolling your daughter, as a facilitator, as a donor, or as an ally—can be your own act of leadership, paving the way for the next generation of Jewish women leaders.



Tishrey