

INTRODUCTION

DREAMING BIGGER

Dear Teen Leader,

Teens are changing the world. You are changing *our* world.

Teen leaders are planning, protesting, and raising the social consciousness of those around them. They are questioning the status quo, using technology to do good, and pushing others to do so as well. Teens are leading others. In sports, through extramural activities, and in clubs.

They're helping kids with cancer and teaching residents of senior facilities how to use the internet. They're holding bake sales and car washes for tzedakah and working as counselors in day camps and overnight camps, youth movements, and travel programs. Does this sound like you? For example . . .

- Do you look at problems others ignore? ✓
- Do you have a strong desire to fix what's broken? ✓
- Do you find joy in helping others? ✓
- Do you want to do something big in the world? ✓

If you're reading this book, chances are the answer is yes to at least one of these questions. Maybe you want to help neighbors or those in need through community service, advocate for a political cause, or run a debate club. You want to create change locally or globally—or both.

We know more about Jewish teens today than we've ever known before. Drs. Arielle Levites and Liat Sayfan surveyed over fifteen thousand teens in their

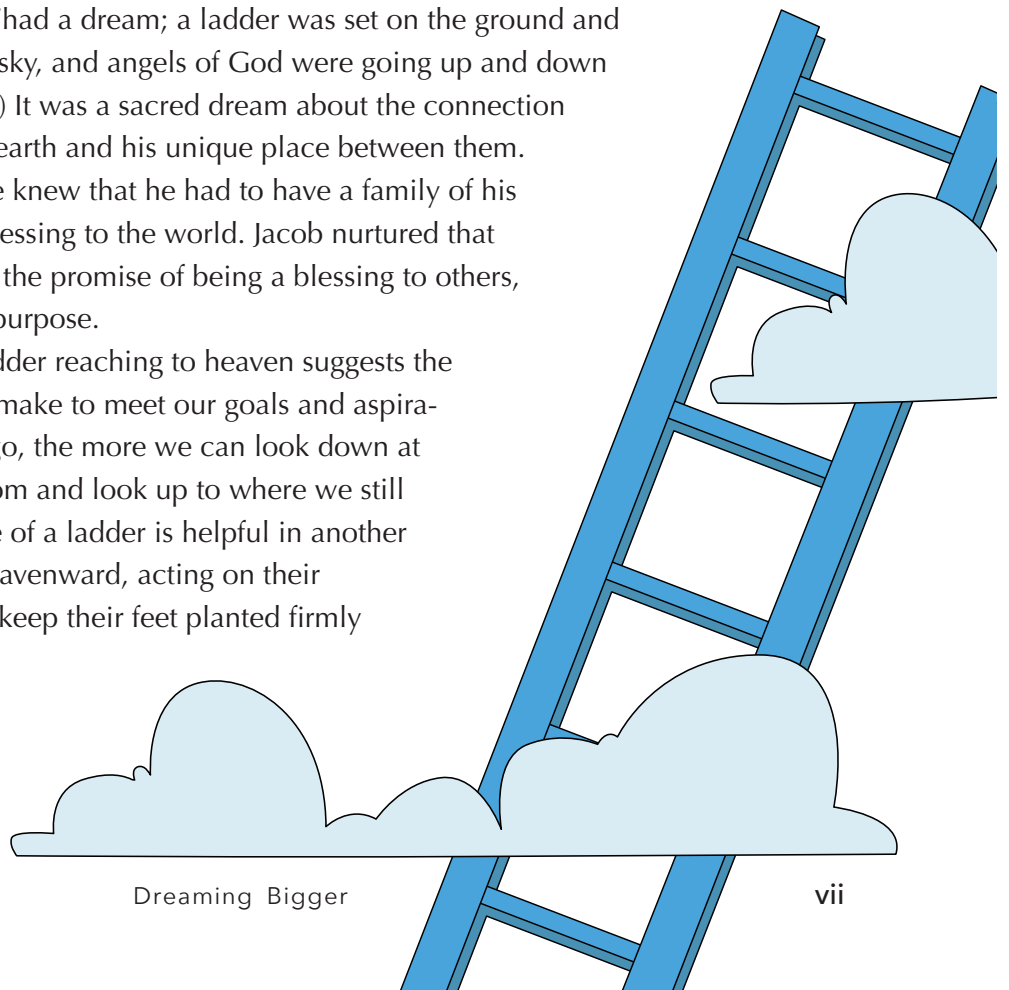
groundbreaking study “Gen Z Now: Understanding and Connecting with Today’s Jewish Teens.” Their findings tell us a lot about how Jewish teens feel about Judaism and their role in it. Teens today have a strong sense of self and feel proud to be Jewish. They enjoy learning about other Jewish communities and Jewish holidays and feel positive about celebrating them. They value strong friendships, family bonds, and the opportunity to be mentored. They want to be part of the Jewish people and have a positive relationship with the people and State of Israel. They seek language to express their spiritual journeys and their struggles. They also want to make a difference in the communities in which they live and the world at large.

Today’s Jewish teens are a generation of doers and creative thinkers who have the skills and confidence to know they don’t have to ask permission or wait for adults to make the world a kinder, better place.

What the research tells us are things you may already know because you are now designing your Jewish future. Now’s the time to find your voice and your causes, to think about your influence, mission, and purpose, and to bring others along with you to do good in the world. You are leading. You are dreaming bigger.

Judaism is a continuous story of dreams and dreamers. In the Torah, Jacob, as a teenager, “had a dream; a ladder was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and angels of God were going up and down on it.” (Genesis 28:12) It was a sacred dream about the connection between heaven and earth and his unique place between them. When he woke up, he knew that he had to have a family of his own and become a blessing to the world. Jacob nurtured that dream, held tightly to the promise of being a blessing to others, and made it his life’s purpose.

The image of a ladder reaching to heaven suggests the climb each of us can make to meet our goals and aspirations. The higher we go, the more we can look down at where we’ve come from and look up to where we still want to go. The image of a ladder is helpful in another way: while striving heavenward, acting on their dreams, leaders must keep their feet planted firmly on the ground.



Inner Workout

- What do you usually dream about?

- Describe a dream that had an influence on your life.

Great leadership is built on big dreams. Shimon Peres, the ninth president of the State of Israel, who gave decades to public service, once offered this leadership advice:

People sometimes ask me: if you look back, what were your biggest mistakes? I will answer: we thought we had great dreams. And now we understand that they were not so great. Dream big. The bigger your dream, the more you will achieve.

Peres was not the only leader to believe in the power of dreams. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, who was the chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth and a great Jewish leader, once wrote, "Dream dreams. Never be afraid to let your imagination soar."

Pay attention to your dreams. Nurture them and grow them. Act on them and be bold.

What are your big, audacious dreams?
Let's discover them.

Erica and Benji

DEFINING JEWISH LEADERSHIP

Before we jump into talking about Jewish leadership, let's define what leadership actually is: the act of moving a group of people or an organization to achieve a common goal. In the Jewish tradition, spiritual leadership is not about power. It's about serving others and influencing people to make positive change. It's about taking action that is inspired by values as part of a life driven by meaning. It's about having an inspiring role in the ongoing Jewish conversation.

Peter Drucker (1909–2005), a leadership expert, defined leadership as the lifting of human vision to “higher sights.” This also means raising human “performance to a higher standard.” It involves pushing people beyond what they thought of as their limits. John Quincy Adams (1767–1848), the sixth president of the United States, is attributed with saying, “If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, you are a leader.” Drucker and Adams saw their primary work as moving and growing others.

In Jewish leadership, helping others often stems from Jewish values such as *tzedakah* (charity as justice), *chesed* (loving-kindness), and *tikun olam* (healing the world). Thousands of Jewish heroes throughout history and in the present offer us leadership lessons and personal examples. Jewish leadership is enriched by Jewish learning.

According to Mark Charendoff, the president of the Maimonides Fund, a foundation dedicated to education and Jewish identity, “The Jews have a unique contribution to make . . . the Jewish community can help society be kinder, more generous, spiritual and closer to God—that may be the best and only way to transform society.” Charendoff believes that Jewish texts and values are a pathway to help leaders raise the bar with “the highest level of ethics and meaning.”



Liron Lipinsky Salitrik, who worked in Jewish education before joining the B'nai B'rith Youth Organization (BBYO), invites us to merge our Judaism with our leadership:

To me, being Jewish and being a leader is the same. It's not like one day you're doing Jewish leadership and another you're leading. . . . You're not just Jewish on certain days of the week or in Jewish buildings with four walls. You carry Judaism with you everywhere.

Jewish leadership is about rising to the challenges of service and having an active and inspiring role in our evolving Jewish story. As the Torah unfolds, we meet many leaders who shaped the ancient Jewish world and beyond through their vision, sense of responsibility, and commitment: Isaac, Jacob, Rebecca, Joseph, Miriam, Moses, Samuel, David, Jeremiah, and Esther, to name but a few. They were all young people who matured into leadership, rising to meet a challenge and taking charge of a situation—often a crisis—and influencing others along the way. They had to make personal sacrifices, and they had plenty of “dragons” to slay on their way to becoming everyday heroes.

Inner Workout

- Name one of your personal heroes. Explain some of the ways in which they have influenced you or others.

- If you could wave a magic wand and make a real difference to any cause in the world, what would it be and why?

- What “dragon” would you have to slay to make this happen?

Let's meet some outstanding teen leaders—people who were inspired to become leaders and change our world for the better for many different reasons. First, two leaders you might already know who started as teens. Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani activist for girls' education, is the world's youngest Nobel Prize laureate. When she was eleven, she started a blog for the BBC to document the hardships girls faced under the Taliban regime. At sixteen, she cowrote the international bestseller *I Am Malala*. Then there's Greta Thunberg, a Swedish environmental activist who began by convincing her parents to reduce their carbon footprint and then, at age fifteen, called a "school strike" for climate change outside the Swedish parliament, eventually leading twenty thousand students to join her in protests worldwide. The same year, she addressed the United Nations Climate Change Conference, and in 2019, she was included in Forbes 100 Most Powerful Women and named as *Time* magazine's Person of the Year.



There are also teens who are not household names (yet) who are using their voices for good. Asean Johnson was only nine when he made an impassioned speech opposing the Chicago mayor's proposal to close his school and forty-nine others in predominantly Black and Latino neighborhoods. "You should be investing in these schools, not closing them!" he said. His elementary school stayed open. When Asean was twelve, he spoke in Washington, DC, at a rally for hundreds of educators and activists supporting public education and social justice. Speaking through tears, he shared the tragedies he was witnessing: "I don't even know if I can make it past the age that I am with everything that's happening."

Rishab Jain is an inventor, researcher, developer, and YouTuber from Oregon. When he was thirteen, 3M named him one of America's top young scientists for developing a software tool that uses artificial intelligence to help doctors more accurately treat pancreatic cancer.

Melati and Isabel Wijsen are sisters and climate activists from Indonesia. At ages twelve and ten, they launched the "Bye Bye Plastic Bags" campaign to reduce harm to ocean life. They organized a cleanup that inspired twenty thousand people to join them in collecting sixty-five tons of plastic waste.

We also want to introduce you to some Jewish teen leaders who are changing the world as we know it.

Jamie Margolin is a former gymnast from Seattle. When she was fifteen, she cofounded the youth climate action organization Zero Hour, which aims to center the voices of teens in the conversation around climate and environmental justice through youth-led marches and protests. Jamie says:

I felt a drive and passion to protect what was left for my future and my life. I was in second grade when I recognized this, but I didn't know how to take action until I was fourteen. No one tells kids how to take action.

Jamie says her Jewish background inspired her to get involved: "What I've learned from my Jewish values is that silence is complicity. We can't ignore things; we have to stand up for what we believe in."

When Arielle Geismar was seventeen, she won a Diller Tikkun Olam Award for creating NYC Says Enough, an organization that educates people about gun violence and promotes teen activism, connecting with more than twenty-three thousand people across partisan lines to create reform. She sees being a leader as a response to what she calls the "lockdown generation" created by the perilous intersection of gun violence, antisemitism, and white supremacy. Reflecting on two synagogue shooting incidents—at Chabad of Poway in California in 2019, and at the Tree of Life Congregation in Pennsylvania in 2018—Arielle said,

The hatred of antisemitism and white supremacy is deeply woven into those incidents. Part of it is seeing my community being hurt by hatred. It's painful and traumatizing to many Jewish people who understand where this leads.

Like the other teen leaders we've met in this chapter, Arielle saw darkness in the world and brought her light to it, just as the biblical prophet Isaiah asked: "To open blind eyes; to remove a prisoner from confinement, dwellers in darkness from a dungeon." (Isaiah 42:7)

Our job every day is to see the darkness that others are in and share our light. We cannot slay every dragon, but we can slay some.

Jewish Bright Spot

The prophet Isaiah had a defining moment early in his mission when he saw that there was no one leading the Jewish people. God was looking for a leader and asked, "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?" Isaiah's response: *Hineni*, which means "Here I am; send me." (Isaiah 6:8)

1. What do you think Isaiah meant when he said "Here I am"?

2. Why did he even need to say it?

3. Describe a "Here I am; send me" moment you've experienced.
