

TEENS / WHY NOT ASK

Not a question: She'elot Fellowship fosters Jewish teen engagement by encouraging teens to ask

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By **ADAM REINHERZ**

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She'elot gives local teens a chance to work through texts and discuss big questions. (Photo by kaboompics.com via Pexels)

A fellowship for teens is purposefully raising more questions than answers. She'elot, which is administered by the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh and supported by the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh, provides students with a regular opportunity to sit, eat, study and discuss pressing matters, including [approaches to addressing antisemitism](#), issues of faith and communal dynamics.

Maria Carson, JCC's director of Jewish education and arts, teen division, said the fellowship is [driven by motivated teens](#) seeking greater insight on challenging topics.

By meeting regularly throughout the school year, and studying Jewish texts with peers, teens are broadening understanding and creating community, she said.

She'elot, which means "questions" in Hebrew, was created nearly four years ago in an effort to provide "innovative Jewish learning experiences," Rachael Speck, JCC's chief program and innovation officer, said.

The program relies on "experiential learning that supports the teens' curiosity about Jewish life," Speck continued. "It's all about asking questions, and engaging in dialogue around those questions, [based on their own Jewish identity and experiences](#)."

Azi Knoll, a participant in the fellowship and Hillel Academy of Pittsburgh student, said the program's strength is its ability to encourage young people to ask questions and "[hear from kids your own age](#)."

Along with Azi, nearly 25 other local teens meet regularly at the JCC in Squirrel Hill to eat a kosher dinner, read Jewish texts and inquire. Participants hail from across the area and represent various denominational backgrounds and schools.

Carson said she's pleased to see young people from different Jewish streams sitting together, studying, discussing and learning from one other.

"As an Orthodox Jew it's nice to hear other people's perspectives," Azi said. And for people who are "not so familiar with Orthodoxy, it's nice to show them how Orthodox Jews act and to answer any questions they have."

While the JCC values the fellows' diversity, the program's beauty is that it "creates a very unique environment where teens can feel connected to other teens — not only in a Jewish setting but through this Jewish learning experience," Speck said.

Creating a "relational network" rests at the [core of the JCC's approach to teen engagement](#), she continued. "We are not at a time anymore where we can just simply deliver content. It has to be relevant and it has to be meaningful to their lives. And again, for us, [it really starts and ends with those relationships](#)."

Though the endgame may be creating a stronger Jewish community, program organizers know that desired outcome requires investment. [Each participant is awarded \\$250](#) for successfully completing the fellowship.

After watching multiple cohorts move through the program, Carson takes pride in the meaningful conversations sparked and the lasting connections formed. With this cohort wrapping up in May, she hopes people appreciate that "high-level Jewish thought is happening in Pittsburgh, and students want to have high-level Jewish thought."

As an example, each cohort tends to fixate on something different; for those curious what this year's group is most curious about, she said, it's the "umbrella question of 'How should we interact with people we don't agree with?'" **PJC**

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