



The millennial generation

By Betsy Stone, Ph.D.

As we leave our dining rooms and bedrooms and return to communal workspaces, some generational differences become starkly clear. Rabbi Danny Burkeman raised some important issues in his recent article on suburban millennials, highlighting ways Jewish spaces might be more attentive to some and not others. He's right.

In my work with clergy and other Jewish professionals, I hear remarkably consistent concerns about millennials. They need too much, they want too much, they think work should be fun, they switch jobs too often, they aren't willing to pay their dues.

I also hear consistent concerns FROM millennials. It's these concerns I wish to highlight today. I recognize that I am speaking of a generation in the aggregate, and that these thoughts may not apply to any specific individual or organization, but I know that our institutions should be considering the ways we nurture, develop and support millennial staff. It's the only way to retain talent.

Millennials grew up in a time of political and financial insecurity. They were marked by Sept. 11 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Their own economic experience was slowed by the Great Recession, which also delayed marriage and parenthood for some. Many were unable to find jobs, and may have moved back in with parents, further deepening a sense of failure in the transition to adulthood. They have not been able to acquire wealth, which often comes through home ownership. They will not be as financially successful as their parents, even now, in mid-career. Their trust in social institutions is eroded by the failure of these institutions to meet challenges.

They are also a generation that tends towards increased open-mindedness. They are more likely to partner across old racial and gender lines, and more accepting of other people's choices. They are better educated than previous generations – and they were told that education would open doors for them. And they are digital natives, but that doesn't entitle the rest of us to make them our digital translators. Older Americans should recognize and respect their expertise – in digital and generational spheres.

Millennials have clear and important strengths, strengths that were nurtured in their homes and schools. They like to work collaboratively and can be very creative. They want their workplaces to help them grow, their supervision to be valuable, they crave constructive feedback. They treasure family time, and will prioritize flexibility so they can eat dinner with their children. They don't just talk about well-being – they make it happen.

They have high ethical standards. They grew up with Me Too and Black Lives Matter, and want their leadership to be ethical, not pragmatic. They cannot understand organizations that have swept away misconduct or have not affirmatively addressed workplace justice issues.

In my work with younger professionals, I hear story after story about millennials being denigrated for their ideas. Whether it's a new approach to worship or a creative outreach to their peers, many of our younger professionals feel unheard and devalued. And this is chasing them from communal spaces.

These issues don't just arise in our community institutions. We see them in the political sphere, where younger politicians must band together to be heard. If we keep saying "That's not the way we do it," they will keep finding ways to demand change. If boomers keep a stranglehold on power, how do millennials have an impact? If millennials are leaving your organization, do you even know why?

My guess is that many millennials don't experience their organizations as loyal, but as demanding loyalty from them. They see the glass ceiling created by boomers who cannot share power, who do not see the expertise of their younger colleagues. We raised millennials on visions of cooperative learning, but our power structures are

vertical. How do we reconcile old models with their expectation of flatter, shared leadership? There are demands that they work harder and longer hours, under strictures imposed by corporate cultures. And there is no downtime, too little recognition and reward.

Mine is not the voice of a millennial, but the voice of a boomer. I raised millennials. I see a generation interested in joining, in making their world better. True inclusion demands that there is space for multiple voices. If we offer lip service to the visions of millennials, they can tell. If we don't let people know they matter, they will leave for places that are more welcoming – of their money, their ideas and their work.

If parenthood is anything, it is a lifelong lesson. Our children are our teachers. Millennials are also our teachers. Are you even listening?

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