

In spring of 2023, the Park Avenue Synagogue Teen Department worked with the NYM Region to create a pilot program called the Tzedek Fellowship, a new hands-on leadership training initiative for teens to develop a tikkun olam initiative. I had the honor to work with Drs. Steven and Heidi Mandel and Aaron Altman directly to create this program from the ground up.

The Tzedek Fellowship at PAS ran from January to May and will continue yearly. Teens applied for the fellowship with a tikkun olam project they were already working on, or an idea to start one. They were able to apply alone or in groups.

Each month, the group of bright and engaged teens convened for a seminar, and each seminar included an action item that they were to complete by the next month's meeting. By the second session, each fellow used what they had learned to establish the mission and vision statement for their initiative. When we learned about public speaking, fellows wrote and delivered elevator pitches.

Each fellow was paired with a clergy mentor at PAS. Mentors met with their mentees regularly to offer support for their monthly action items. Mentors helped fellows refine their mission statement and gave feedback on their elevator pitch. This was a wonderful opportunity for teens to form connections with clergy and other staff members at PAS, who they might not have spoken to since their Bnei Mitzvah!

The 2023 PAS Tzedek Fellowship had nine participants with eight very different projects. The topics include Parkinson's, intergenerational connections, mental health support, children with terminal illness, women's businesses in Africa, dress recycling, food insecurity, and antisemitism. I was inspired to see how creative they were in terms of how they would make an impact.

Each participant in the PAS Tzedek Fellowship received a certificate and a letter attesting to the strong leadership and innovation skills they displayed at our graduation ceremony. The PAS Tzedek Fellowship hopes to be an example of how different synagogues can interpret the NYM Region's Tzedek Program to suit their youth's needs. The NY Metro area will recognize every synagogue with a youth who participates. There is funding to sustain this program for many years and we're excited to see where it goes!