

The High Holidays Through Our Children's Eyes

By Meg McClendon

There's a story Elka Bernstein, Executive Director of Charlotte Jewish Preschool, tells about my daughter Tess that I will never tire of hearing. It's the story of how in the inaugural class of J-Tots, Tess might have been the youngest student during that first year - but she was first to cover her eyes for Shabbat. Elka delights in this story, covering her own eyes and smiling as she tells it. I smile as I hear it too because that was the year that Tess's foundation into Judaism was established. Her next three years at Charlotte Jewish Preschool built upon that foundation. And, it is her excitement for the high holidays, learned and nurtured at such a young age, that once again gets me excited for this time of year.

I will be the first to tell you that I am not the most religious of people. And in this day of war, tough

political campaigns, and economic hardship, it is easy to feel a bit jaded - a bit weary. However, there is also something sweet about this time of year. It's something sweeter than the apples and honey that come home with our kids from Charlotte Jewish Preschool for Rosh Hashanah. It's the chance we, as parents, have to experience the high holidays through our children's eyes. For Rosh Hashanah, our children bring home more than their self made shofars and placemats. They bring home an energy and happiness about the Jewish New Year. They also bring home a strong sense of social responsibility. Tzedakah is stressed this time of year both at Charlotte Jewish preschool and at home. With the start of this New Year, there is a renewed sense to give what we can to others in need. The fact that our children receive this message

at such an early age is sweet indeed.

Yom Kippur brings a sense of reflection and the critical lesson that no matter what age you are, you will always have the ability to become a better person. What a powerful message this time of year and throughout our lives. I will never forget Tess's Charlotte Jewish Preschool newsletter the week before Yom Kippur when she was in the 4s. Her teacher, Ms. Nadine, sent home a list of what she and her classmates wanted forgiveness for this year. Tess said she was sorry for squeezing her younger brother's arm. It was a small incident that happened weeks earlier. I was surprised she had done it at the time but pleasantly surprised when I received the newsletter that she remembered it, reflected on it, and was sorry for it. I was proud of her. And, I was reminded to make my

apologies for the things that I was sorry about that year - both big and small.

It is Tess's passion for the high holidays and Judaism as a whole that solidified my commitment to continuing her Jewish education. It has also made me feel secure in the knowledge that my little boy Jack, who is just starting the 2s, will have a similar experience and grounding spiritual connection. Now that Tess has graduated from Charlotte Jewish Preschool, she is in religious school at Temple Beth El. My hope is that she continues on her religious path and also on the path to becoming the absolute best person she can be and the best citizen she can be. I hope she will continue to delight in the big traditions of the holidays and the weekly traditions of Shabbat. And, my hope remains that she will always cover her eyes when the candles are lit for Shabbat and



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continue to make her happiness for the season rub off on all those around her.

For more information about having your child Learn, Grow, and Connect with us, please contact Alyson Kalik, CJP registrar, at 704-944-6776 or akalik@shalom-charlotte.org. Half day enrollment for the 2012/2013 school year for children ages 1 to 5 is currently underway. ☆

A CJDS Graduate Speaks (from College)

When measuring success, we are told to collect data that evaluates the progress and growth of the project, effort or organization. At schools, we administer tests and assessments to gauge the achievements that have been reached. However, there is a measure of success that cannot be quantified by a graph, a pie chart, or a spreadsheet. And, that is the whole assessment of a human being, and specifically a Jewish human being.

At a Jewish day school we are preparing our students for more than successful academic students. While that is important because it sets the foundation for future studies that enable our children to move forward in their endeavors and earn a livelihood, there is so much more than that.

Graduating children that demonstrate the true meaning of a "mensch" is not quantifiable. There really is no published curriculum that one can use to accomplish this goal. But, on the other hand, it is probably the most important lesson and behavior we can impart. Everybody looks to us to set the tone for kindness, caring, giving. It is disappointing to the general community and especially disappointing to the Jewish community when a Jewish businessman, a Jewish professor, or a Jewish leader makes a bad choice. We set a very high bar for ourselves, as do others.

In addition, from all of the recent studies and surveys, it is clear that we are losing Jewish people every day. We must ask why. We must put all of our efforts into sustaining our people. No one can argue that the first group to address is our children. We must give them reason to be proud to be Jewish. It is no longer sufficient to expect this pride to come naturally. There are too many distractions in our world to expect them to pick it up by osmosis. We must respect their intelligence and teach them "why" we are Jewish, "what" makes us, and "what" it means to be Jewish. We need to teach them the facts, delve into the text, ask questions, seeking until we find the answers that satisfy us. We

must tell our children that they can also teach and that they can pass on this love of Judaism, this belief that we were to be a light unto the nations.

I received a draft of a testimonial from one of our alumni that illustrates the importance of what a day school teaches and imparts:

I have always been a curious, speculative, and skeptical person, and in hindsight, CJDS was a great atmosphere for a child with such characteristics to thrive. As the classes were always small, it was never difficult to approach the teachers with all of the questions I would have. One lesson I learned throughout my time there, is that it is okay to question Judaism - or rather, it is encouraged. To this day I struggle with aspects of Judaism all of the time, but I believe that my conviction is that much stronger because of it. I am now comfortable enough and have the confidence to pursue the issues that come up in my mind, whether on my own via meticulous scrutiny of texts, or via seeking advice and insight from one who is more knowledgeable than I.

This has carried on into my secular studies in college as well - especially in philosophy, where the same kind of attention to detail and active challenging of the texts is necessary to succeed. One does not merely go to school to "learn philosophy," but to develop the skills to "philosophize" alone. Similarly, CJDS taught me not to passively accept everything without question, but to constantly question both the material and one's own beliefs, with the final goal being of improving one's conduct in everyday life.

I am currently majoring in Philosophy and Psychology, and have realized that the two are in balance. On the one hand, I enjoy pondering the big questions in life such as freewill vs determinism, the meaning of life, and the relationship of right and wrong, just to name a few.

On the other hand, studying the science of psychology has equipped me with the capabilities

to have positive relationships with all kinds of people. One never knows when he will find himself in the position to help someone just by giving honest feedback and good advice. The practice of psychology is not limited to a clinic or a guidance counselor's office, but can be applied every day as one makes personal decisions and interacts with family, colleagues, and professors. While a background in psychology is obviously not a requirement for one to be good with people, I have personally noticed a positive change in my relationships as I broaden my awareness of how people feel, act, or perceive different situations in life.

This past year, we were given the opportunity to have "outsiders" tell us what a gift we give our students. Our accreditation team which was made up of various educators from the Southeast, some Jewish and some not, visited us in February 2012 and met with various groups of our constituents. One of the groups were made up of our alumni students in high school. They were blown away. They could not get over their intelligence, understanding, and empathy for others. They were able to feel the Jewish pride, the gratitude they had to the day school, and their willingness to give to others and pay it forward. From their reaction, it was clear we do not sufficiently appreciate the effect we have on these kids. They continued to reprimand us because we were not sharing the fact that our alumni characterize all that is good and right about the school.

Therefore, during this year 2012-2013, we will be sharing testimonials in the *CJN* and through the mail from various alumni who are now in college. It was heartwarming when we reached out to our alumni regarding this ad campaign, they expressed such joy in helping the school, shouting to the world how appreciative they are and sharing their amazing successes with the community. ☆

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