

Beyond Identity: Day Schools Deliver Jewish Literacy

By Dr. Marc Kramer

A great many articles about day schools take as their starting point the assumption that the main argument in favor of day school – the main reason parents should send their children there – is its impact on Jewish identity. Jewish day schools exist because they are the most effective shapers of strong Jewish identities. Want your children to be Jewish and raise Jewish children? Your best odds lie in day-school education.

I beg to differ. “Jewish identity” is a flimsy shingle to hang on a school door. These authors acknowledge as much when they hedge their bets: Jewish summer camp has been shown to be likewise a powerful force for molding Jewish identity, and no force is stronger than a Jewish home where Judaism is practiced consistently and lovingly. As discussed in the literature, Jewish identity is understood to be idiosyncratic and fluid, highly personal, beyond critique, and subject to change.

The real argument is that Jewish day schools uniquely make possible authentic Jewish literacy. Camp, great. Youth group, great. Israel trips, great. But none of these experiences give our children the skills, tools, role models, information, exposure, and positive dispositions to personally engage with Jewish sacred texts – ancient to modern – in ways that leave a lasting imprint on their hearts and souls.

Too many American Jews have little more than a passing acquaintance with the treasures of Jewish tradition. They can neither read nor write, let alone speak, their national language. They do not understand the laws of Judaism and have little sense of the aura of obligation and sanctity that the mitzvot engender. They fundamentally understand their own calendar, holidays, history, and culture through the lens of another society – secular American norms that are strongly colored by Christianity – so much so that are more likely to pass cultural litmus tests of Anglo-Protestantism than those of Anglo-Judaism. (Consider: How many US Jews know more about Valentine’s Day than Shavuot? They cannot name three kings of Israel yet know the names and habits of every British royal.) They mistake acceptance into Western society as proof of the superfluosity of Jewish mores and values.

And yet, most American Jews still “identify” as Jewish. They encounter Jewish moments and “feel Jewish.” They partake in certain foods and feel they are “eating Jewishly.” They do good and just and charitable deeds and think that are “acting Jewishly.” They don’t go to church or hunt because these are “not Jewish.” In short, they have personally defined a sense of what being Jewish is and as such, have a “Jewish identity.”

Jewish identity is fuel-efficient: Just a little juice and it runs. As such, the small jolts of energy that supplementary schools and camps and youth groups and summer trips to Israel provide are enough to fuel “Jewish identity.” (Full disclosure: I am a product of all of these enterprises.) I am reminded

I think of an atomic power plant: it takes a great deal of expertise, time and energy to make fusion possible, but the result is an ever more powerful, energizing source that can light 100,000 homes. It isn’t cheap, it isn’t easy, it comes with risks, it comes with controversies, yet the results are unparalleled.

Day schools likewise require tremendous resources and demand sacrifices from parents and the community. But they are capable of generating a Jewish light that no other source can remotely equal. Judaism is a difficult religion, with a great deal to learn just to achieve a baseline of proficiency. It is easy to “feel” Jewish; it is just as easy to feel less Jewish. For the hard work of achieving competency, the confidence to take ownership over our heritage and translate it in ways that it continues to be resonant and meaningful for Jews today and in the future – for this, there is no substitute for day schools. ☆

Dr. Marc Kramer is Executive Director at RAVSAK.

CJDS Charlotte Jewish Day School

of the classic third grade science fair project of wiring a nightlight bulb to a halved lemon: the ion interaction of citric acid, iron, and copper creates enough electricity to light the bulb. It is relatively cheap, easy to do, easy to explain, and the fact that little light is produced is accepted and acceptable.

Jewish literacy, on the other hand, is a real gas guzzler. It takes a great deal of fuel to power Jewish literacy, especially when Jewish literacy and Hebrew literacy are intertwined (as I believe it must be). The engines of Jewish literacy – engines that drive Jewish citizenship, peoplehood, spiritual meaning, ethical living and intellectualism – cannot simply sip from Sunday school and summer camp; they need full tanks and ample refills at the pumping stations we call day schools. Here

Federation’s Main Event with Rabbi Shmuley Boteach

(Continued from page 1)

people in need, rescuing people in danger, and keeping Jewish life strong. The Jewish Federation believes in the power of community and in working together to make the world a better place. Please visit our website www.jewishcharlotte.org to learn more about the Jewish Federation of Greater Charlotte.

The mission of the Jewish Federation of Greater Charlotte is to raise and distribute funds to support and enrich the lives of Jews locally, nationally, in Israel, and worldwide. Through education, planning and community building, the Federation’s mission ensures that Jewish values, goals, traditions and connections are preserved for current and future generations. ☆

The two most precious things we can give our children are Roots and Wings -- to be firmly rooted in our rich Judaic heritage, and to be inspired to reach one’s fullest potential.

-- Rabbi Joseph H. Lookstein



ROSEWOOD
The Castle in Cotswold

The storybook setting of Rosewood at Providence and Sharon Amity is known by its generations-old rose garden, a Queen City landmark. Inside is a tale of treasured friendships, rich amenities and everyday elegance that adds up to a lifestyle worth more than gold. A limited number of condominium homes are available at Rosewood. Inquire today.

{ Concierge • Formal gardens • Luxurious pool • Tennis court • 24-hour security }
Deluxe fitness center • Gourmet coffee bar • Generous parking

FROM THE \$400's



2823 PROVIDENCE ROAD
CHARLOTTE, NC 28211

ROSEWOODCONDOS.COM | 704.366.7862 | FROM THE \$400's
{ Model home open, call Missy Stewart or Kathy Landgraaf for an appointment }

