

הידיעון

# HaYidion

SUMMER 2018

קייץ תשע"ח



**School  
ADVOCACY**



**PRIZMAH**

Center for Jewish Day Schools

# HaYidion

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**The views expressed in this journal do not necessarily reflect the positions of Prizmah.**

## SCHOOL ADVOCACY



ELLIOTT RABIN

*Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders.*  
Henry David Thoreau

To convince someone to do something is one of the most mysterious activities we may undertake. We're not talking about brainwashing, about manipulating people to do something they shouldn't, that is unethical or against their interests. By "school advocacy," we mean the elusive effort to persuade someone to do something that we believe is of limitless value to them, but that they may not be aware of or believe, yet, that it holds such value. That "something" is, of course, attending a Jewish day school.

As the articles in the issue demonstrate, there is no one key that will open the doors of uncertainty to locate the seed of interest latent in every parent. Advocacy is equal parts science and art. One school may do research into their community, another may invest in a more exciting website, a third develops an appealing radio ad campaign while a fourth invents a new format for parlor meetings. Which school will succeed the most? The one that finds the most direct route to speak to the heart of their prospective parents.

The expression "plant a seed" evokes the magic that admissions professionals and their team attempt to perform. The school seeks to conjure the wonders that await the student who crosses the threshold to spend years immersed in the school's education and culture. The immediate and long-term benefits appear real and tangible in the parents' inner eye. They grasp that the school is about so much more than the information their child will learn—as indeed he or she will. They envision their child's intellectual, spiritual and ethical growth; they delight in the acquisition of a circle of friends and teachers who will stay with them for a lifetime, no matter where each member is found on the globe. They get that to join the school is a form of homecoming, a discovery of a deep sense of belonging to a specific community and a much larger community in space and time.

Then there is the challenge of convincing parents to move past their sticker shock. Perhaps no argument is more persuasive than the observation by Derek Bok, former president of Harvard: "If you think education is expensive—try ignorance." Bok meant that in the academic sense: Our society relies upon a well-educated citizenry. Science, business, education, military, etc.—all fields depend upon a high level of training and a core of people with expertise. The same is no less true in the Jewish world. Jewish education is expensive; Jewish ignorance has far greater and more pernicious costs. Education has always been the lifeblood of Jewish identity, community, faith, worldview, wit, literature... It is the soil that nourishes and sustains the neshamah of the Jewish people and the creativity and intelligence of individual Jews.

The first section of articles presents strategies and arguments that apply generally to a wide range of schools, and that day schools can adopt for their own advocacy. **English** explains how day schools can advocate to millennials, who form the majority of parents of school-age children, while **Sheridan** answers common marketing questions that schools ask. **Arcus-Goldberg and Zelkowitz** describe the thinking and process that went into the creation of a new kind of school brochure/viewbook. **Chiat, Perla and Stratford** share learning from extensive research into the views of current and prospective day school parents.

**Fox, Kalman and Niderberg** marshal both research and anecdote to show how a school that welcomes a diverse range of learners improves the education for all students—important information for prospective families. The next few articles offer advice on particular forms of advocacy: **A. Wolf**, alumni; **Bar-Or**, open houses; **Slavin**, Web. And for a treat, Prizmah's creative director **Von Samek** interviews marketing guru **Naddaff**. While turning the pages, don't miss the feast of words and images that students from 20 schools submitted in response to the question, What makes your school great?

The school spread in this issue features Success Stories, examples of changes that schools put in place that have made a noticeable difference in recruitment. In the second section of articles, authors discuss strategies and arguments specific to Jewish day schools. **Kislowicz** draws lessons from the powerful tug that the day school exerts upon the Jewish community of Rome. Leading funder **Mayberg** offers inspiring lessons for day school advocacy from the mezuzah. **M. Wolf** conveys ideas for rendering the partnership with federations an effective means to raise the profile of day schools within communities. **Heller Stern** discusses a program that educates Reform rabbis to become potent day school advocates.

The next two pieces, by **Kleinberg** and **Spiegel**, give a point-counterpoint on the issue of recruitment to non-Jewish students. **Cashman and Malkus** focus on the role that research in Hebrew pedagogy can serve to improve not only classroom practice but advocacy as well. **Simhai and Steiner** describe a program that turns schools into community programming centers, drawing in families that may not have been aware of or interested in the day school previously. The issue closes with an article by **Wiener** on the journey, both lonesome and full of fellow travelers, of creating and advocating for a school in formation. Accompanying these articles are reflections by administrators at two rabbinical schools about the value that they see in day schools.

May you enjoy this issue in the relaxation after the end of school, and discover in it seeds to plant in the new year.



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# SEEING THE VOICES OF DAY SCHOOL ADVOCATES



PAUL BERNSTEIN

In the dramatic scene where the Torah is given at Mt. Sinai, we read that “all the people saw the voices and the blasts of lightning” (Shemot/Exodus 20:15). Much has been written and discussed about this synesthetic moment. What can it mean to “see” voices? Indeed, the paradox has led to less literal translations of the verse itself, with the verb *ro'im* sometimes rendered as “witnessed” or “perceived.” I prefer to hold on to the literal meaning of “saw,” to illustrate an idea that I feel is pervasive throughout our lives and particularly relevant for the day school field.

Sometimes we see or hear something that has the power of more than the words or images that appear on the surface. Midrash Rabbah tells that the Torah was given simultaneously in 70 languages. The whole of what we see or hear represents far more than its basic elements; in one powerful voice, many perspectives and messages can be revealed.

I believe that this idea is at the core of what Jewish day school advocacy is about, bringing many voices together in support of the central idea that Jewish day schools matter, that the voices of thousands of day school students deserve to be heard, and the needs of hundreds of schools must be met.

While governmental lobbying is often referred to as advocacy, I am using the term here—as it is used throughout this issue—to describe whenever and whatever we do to command greater attention for day schools. Yes, lobbying does that in one particular sense; our broader definition includes strategies and messages that prioritize day school education among the myriad community investments of a federation, for example, or demonstrate the impact of a day school education for prospective parents.

Jewish day school advocacy, in all its diversity, falls into three main categories: the local way that schools position themselves individually to deliver on their ambitious missions; the regional approach through which the case for Jewish day school education strengthens a community; and on a more global level, the way Prizmah supports and connects the diversity within the broader day school field. Throughout this issue, you will encounter examples at each level.

A few months ago, in the wake of the horror of the Parkland High School shooting rampage, 168 leaders from day schools of all denominations and across North America joined in one voice

to express outrage and call for common sense legislation that addresses all factors contributing to a safe and secure educational community. Bringing together all these voices was a role that Prizmah embraced, and we were humbled to be in a position to facilitate the publication and dissemination of that important message.

I often like to return to the basic unit of learning that takes place in every classroom: the relationship between teacher and student. Literally and metaphorically, teachers accept the responsibility of drawing out and making heard the voices of their students. These moments, over and over, are the building blocks of Jewish day school advocacy.

In the coming months, Prizmah will continue to imitate that essential act of advocacy. We will promote programs like our leadership cohorts that prioritize learning for aspiring and current heads of school and lay leaders. We will expand the ways our financial sustainability initiatives strengthen the capacity of schools to raise funds. We will partner on the national level with JFNA and regionally with a number of communities to ensure a stable and strong day school landscape. We will work responsively with individual schools on their particular needs and promulgate new models that others can follow.

When we convene the biennial Prizmah Day School Conference next March in Atlanta, we will be putting our advocacy agenda front and center. By gathering together many voices within the day school field, we will create a powerful experience and a multiplier effect that magnifies the work, inspiration and ideas that each participant brings. We aim for conference participants to begin to “see voices,” to perceive in the conference presentations and in the company of their peers a multitude of possibilities and opportunities for day schools everywhere.

Advocacy is not a solitary act, and we depend on many voices to make one powerful impression about the value of the day school endeavor. I thank all of you who are already contributing your voices, careers, resources and passions to Jewish day school education. If Prizmah is truly the “voice of optimism,” as posited by Gary Rosenblatt last year in the pages of the *Jewish Week*, it is due to the hard work of so many who understand, embrace and share all that is wonderful about the potential of Jewish day schools.

## FROM THE BOARD

# A TALE OF TWO PHILANTHROPIES



I like to believe that I'm passionate about a lot of things in the world, but the two causes closest to my heart are the Jewish Federations of North America and the Jewish day school movements.

I have had the privilege of being a Federation professional, a Federation campaign chair, a Federation board president and a National Women's Philanthropy Chair for JFNA. Having traveled the world with JFNA, I can say without question that our federation system is the most important, far-reaching, impactful Jewish charity in the world. Our North American annual campaign of nearly \$900 million raised year after year is the envy of every other charitable organization (even though we complain—and we of course always need more). And with those dollars, with our partner agencies and our thousands of volunteers, we touch and enrich and literally save millions of lives in our local communities, in Israel and in just about every country in the world.

Although I never had the good fortune to attend a Jewish day school myself, I did have the privilege of giving that gift to my three children, who each attended day school from grades K-12. I have had the honor of starting a new day school from scratch and of being president of not just one day school but two. And I can say without question that day schools have nurtured our Jewish communities for generations. Day schools attract talented rabbis and top-notch Jewish educators, so important for those of us who live outside of big Jewish communities. Day schools immerse entire families in exploring our tradition in ways that can never be replicated in a few hours here and there. And most importantly, day schools produce the most proud, knowledgeable, and committed young Jews—young Jews who can intelligently challenge anti-Israel rhetoric on college campuses, who can walk into a synagogue anywhere in the world and feel comfortable, who can speak Hebrew like natives, and who live their lives guided by the Jewish principles embedded in their souls.

This is where my two passions collide. It is precisely these young Jewish day school graduates who are most equipped to take our professional and philanthropic places around the federation table and in the Jewish community at large, making an impact on the entire world. But we don't have enough young people graduating from Jewish day schools to take on those roles that ensure a strong future for the Jewish people. Our day schools are not attracting the numbers that will result in the next generation of professional and philanthropic leadership. This challenge affects both day schools and federations and requires action from both institutions. The federation-day school partnership is the key to ensuring a strong Jewish community for years to come.

I sometimes sense that people are disappointed when I tell them that no single event or speaker can engage a person in a meaningful way for the long term. Not even the Birthright experience lasts forever. The best way to engage Jews in a meaningful way, I believe, is through our Jewish day schools. As members of a Jewish community, we need to ensure that more families want to send their children to day schools, and more families are able to do so. We have to figure out a way to make our day schools better than any public or private option available. We have to make our day schools affordable and financially viable. We have to make our day schools the coolest places on earth to be.

Jewish federations across North America allocate more than \$32 million a year to Jewish day schools. But are we strategically investing in day schools? Or are we just "giving what we gave last year" because that's what we do every year? Having sat on many federation allocation committees, I believe it's all too often the latter.

I'd like to propose a new model, which incorporates some outstanding initiatives undertaken in various Jewish communities. I'd love to see federations partner with local philanthropists and local Jewish community foundations to think about strategically investing in their local day schools above and beyond the annual allocation. Investing in a way that will allow and encourage all Jewish children and their families to consider a day school education. Investing in cutting-edge educational initiatives. Building "Mega Endowment" funds to support day school excellence and to help lower tuition across the board, especially for middle-income families. Investing in marketing and promotion of local schools. Offering communal tuition incentives, community academic and sports scholarships. The list is endless—and exciting!—once we decide that day schools are the richest way to ensure our future.

As a philanthropist, I have witnessed so many examples of lives being changed as a result of the contributions and vision of a community that puts values at its core. Day schools and federations are such natural partners in that they both focus unflinchingly on the future. It has been a personal honor for me to nurture my passion for these two institutions and to see the potential and rewards when they collaborate.

*Ann Pava is acting chair of Prizmah's Board of Directors. She also chairs JFNA's Jewish Education and Engagement Committee. [board@prizmah.org](mailto:board@prizmah.org)*



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*- Jeff Shapiro*

*Technology Director  
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CHUCK ENGLISH

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# Maximizing the Millennial Moment

FIRST WE CALLED THEM GenY. THEN WE CALLED THEM MILLENNIALS. NOW THAT THEY'RE GETTING MARRIED AND HAVING CHILDREN, THEY HAVE BECOME PARENENTIALS. AND, AT OUR SCHOOLS WE CALL THEM: OUR PARENTS.

Demographers and sociologists examine the prevailing attitudes and societal circumstances that surrounded the coming of age of successive generations. Based on that, they ascribe common characteristics—attitudes, mindsets, preferences and behavior—and a name to each generation. For example, Baby boomers were born in the late 1940s and the 1950s. Millennials, born between 1980 and 2000, are now our largest living generation. For schools, the important fact is that millennials are now 18-38 years old, which means that in elementary schools, most prospective parents and the majority of current parents with children in lower grades are millennials. This is the millennial moment.

Better understanding the nature of millennials or parenentials will enable schools to develop strategies to effectively anticipate and meet the needs of prospective and new parents. This has clear and important implications for marketing success, enrollment success and overall school success. With that in mind, we present seven characteristics of the millennial generation and corresponding strategies for success that Jewish day schools should consider implementing.

## SELF-FOCUSED

This generation is the product of the “crayoning on the walls is a form of self expression” parenting approach. Self-esteem was paramount. Millennials were praised as being intelligent, talented, important and special whether they won or lost, passed or failed. Every student at the track meet got a participation ribbon. Today, they are self-focused, seek personal gratification and fulfillment in every situation and crave their own experiences.

**Focus on the parent experience.** Every interaction parents have with someone in the school is going to be significant. You will want to ensure that the amalgam of those interactions—the experience—is positive and communicates that parents are valued and respected.

**Personalize.** The personal tour is a more effective recruitment tool because it allows prospective parents to ask questions related to their children and their needs. Wherever possible, include child-specific information in summaries of class or grade activity. Pre-complete forms with names, addresses and previously provided information.

**Prepare for stealth applications.** Increasingly parents are taking the completely me-centered approach by researching schools and making choices without any prior school contact. Your introduction to your new family is the application you receive. The admissions process conveys a great deal about school culture, and now you have to find a way to transmit all of that to families who have followed their own path to your doorstep.

## CONFIDENT ACHIEVERS

Millennials have great confidence in their own abilities and as a result are establishing themselves as achievers. This is an extremely well educated generation. In fact, a recent Pew study indicates that millennials are on track to be the most educated generation to date, with women dramatically outpacing the educational achievements of previous generations. This is also a goal-oriented cohort and that, combined with their educational and professional prowess, produces parents focused on data and outcomes.

**Prove it.** Ensure that all your value-proposition messaging is accompanied by proof points. If you say that your school offers high-quality, immersive Hebrew language instruction, be prepared to provide the details that demonstrate its unique nature and quality.

**Use data.** Wherever possible, empirically support the case you make for your school. What percentage of teachers have advanced degrees? How do your students' standardized test scores compare to those of competing public and independent schools? What percentage of graduates get their first choice of high school or college?

**Talk long term.** Parenials are looking beyond the preschool class for which they are applying. Thinking about goals and outcomes means understanding where their kids will be after eighth or twelfth grade. Talk to parents about the enduring impact of the full educational journey at your school.

**Raise the bar.** These prospective parents are highly educated. Respect their intellectual ability and without using jargon, don't be afraid to discuss advanced educational concepts and approaches. They will likely understand what's being discussed and will definitely appreciate being treated as intellectual equals.

## COLLABORATORS

This is the sharing generation. Not only do millennials incessantly share experiences online, they overwhelmingly value and are influenced by the opinions of peers. Millennials feel that User Generated Content, the views and experiences of peers, family and friends, to be more memorable and more trusted than any other content. 68% of millennials consider the opinion of peers to be trustworthy, while only 64% feel the same about the opinions of experts. That means that prospective parents value the opinions of friends and family more than those of a head of school. Millennials are also

crowd-sourced decision-makers. 94% consider at least one outside source (someone outside the brand/school being evaluated) when making a purchasing decision, and 40% of millennials consider four or more sources. In turn, 74% of millennials believe they influence the decisions of others.

**Use social media to build brand.** Your posts on Facebook and Instagram (which about half of millennials use) have to be way more than basketball scores and upcoming events. Your social media feed should be a window to your brand. Every Jewish day school does model seders. What makes your seders uniquely you? If someone scrolled through your Facebook timeline, would they ascertain the elements of your school's brand?

**Make social media about community.** Post items that will encourage others to comment and share. You could make your social media feed into an important source of information. The goal is to create a community that extends beyond current stakeholders.

**Influencers.** Influence marketing is a well-established business technique. Companies identify social media users whose network aligns with the profile of a prospective customer and whose posts attract shares and comments. They then approach these users with offers of compensation to mention either the company or its products in their posts. Your school also has natural social media influencers, users with large networks whose posts regularly engage others. Whether they are current or prospective parents, identify them and go out of your way to make sure those users have content about your school they can share.

## PRESSURED

Sheltered childhoods, helicopter parenting, constant affirmation of talent and potential combined with social media's almost inescapable compulsion to compare oneself with others has created a pressured, almost perfectionist generation. A study done for *Inc.* revealed that 67% of millennials felt "extreme pressure to succeed" compared to 40% of Gen X-ers and 23% of baby boomers. In open-ended responses, a majority expressed the sentiment that "they hadn't done enough yet and time was running out." When it comes to parenting, millennials are just as anxious. A study by *Time* magazine reported that 80% of millennial mothers felt it was "important to be the perfect Mom" and 64% of moms believe parenting is more competitive today than it used to be. The Internet has catalyzed parental angst, with 7 in 10 moms saying they go online to look up symptoms and solutions for their kids and 58% of millennials reporting that the available amount of parenting information is overwhelming.

**The remedy of information.** This generational characteristic provides a superb opportunity to differentiate through content marketing. An effective remedy for anxiety is information, and millennials crave all kinds of it. You can provide a host of valuable content like parenting tips, advice on dealing with homework, strategies for non-Hebrew speaking parents helping kids with Hebrew homework, home activities for preschoolers, executive functioning tips as well as curriculum-related information. Make your website a valuable reference for all Jewish parents. Programming is also an excellent and effective vehicle for providing the information that parents crave.

**Be patient and partner.** Accept that millennials come to your school with this burden of angst, and meet them where they are by helping them deal with it. Teachers and administrators may have to reassure parents regarding their children's progress. This could be an excellent basis on which to establish an effective home-school partnership.

## GROUNDING AND CONVENTIONAL

These are not the rebellious social activists of the '60s or the *Breakfast Club* malcontents of the '80s. Millennials are very respectful of their parents and have very conventional attitudes. In addition, millennials crave authenticity from companies and organizations. In a recent study, 90% of millennials say that authenticity is important in deciding which brands to support. Not surprisingly, the data also demonstrates that this is a generation that dislikes and distrusts traditional advertising—both print and online.

**Walk the talk.** It's more critical than ever that you live your brand. What you say are your defining qualities and priorities have to be mirrored in the day-to-day experience of students and parents. There can be no gap. As Steve Freedman, head of school at the Hillel Jewish Day School in Detroit, says, "We must deliver what we say we are delivering for both students, and today, for parents. Schools that provide great experiences not only for students but also for their millennial parents will have the advantage."

**Involve grandparents.** This isn't about "grandpals and special friends" days. The reality is that millennials respect their parents' views and welcome their involvement in the lives of their children. Grandparents are likely very involved in schooling decisions and may also be involved in paying for those decisions. Make grandparents a target of your marketing efforts. Create vehicles to open lines of communication with grandparents. Invite grandparents to recruitment events.

## CAUSE-ORIENTED AND OPTIMISTIC

Millennials' preference for companies that align themselves with social responsibility or purpose is well documented. They want the companies with which they do business to have a mission that is much greater than just turning a profit. Those attitudes also extend to related areas. For example, 57% of millennials buy local or organic foods whenever possible and are often more willing to pay more for a product if it supports the environment. Millennials are also more optimistic than other generations. 86% of millennials said they were optimistic about their own future as opposed to 74% of Gen Xers, and 64% said they were optimistic about the future of the children compared to 54% of Gen Xers.

**Character is an expression of mission.** Parents want more than educational outcomes for their children. In studies of independent school parents, the perceived ability of a school to instill strong, positive character traits is a key differentiator. Character development is an expression of mission. In Jewish day schools, we sometimes take the development of strong values and character for granted, but it is just as important to our parents as it is to those at independent schools. We should put that character development front and center in our efforts. Michael Kay, head of the Solomon Schechter School of Westchester, implores day school leaders to "cultivate a culture of radical *menschlichkeit* within the school."

**Incorporate cause into curriculum.** If millennial parents are cause-minded, they are going to want social justice and communal service to be integral parts of their children's educational experience. This means more than the monthly visit to the seniors' residence and preparing food packages for the less fortunate. At the VBS Day School in Los Angeles, for example, fifth-grade students undertake a two-day mission to the state capital to lobby legislators on a different issue each year. Some independent schools have created the position of director of service education to ensure that their communal service programs are grounded in curriculum and integrated into the school experience. These approaches also appeal to millennial optimism.

**Incorporate wellness.** Healthy lunch programs are already a staple in many schools and should be in yours. You may want to consider adding yoga, Pilates and other wellness-based programs.

## EAGER TECHNOLOGY ADOPTERS AND DISRUPTORS

Although millennials are often described as digital natives, that isn't necessarily the case. Those born in the '80s may not have had a cellphone until they were teenagers and likely only acquired a smartphone as adults. Perhaps as a result of personally witnessing the advent of the Internet and the blossoming ubiquity of technology, this is a generation that views technology as a means to an end and seeks the ways in which technology can radically improve—or disrupt—the way we live and do business. They also look to technology to make their personal lives more convenient.

**Use technology effectively.** A millennial-friendly school will allow parents to complete transactions (application, registration, tuition, etc.) online and ensure that the process is user-focused and seamless.

**E-communicate effectively.** Over half your parents are getting their school communication on a smartphone, and that demands particular attention. Your e-communication has to be mobile-optimized so that it's formatted for the smaller screen, and the user experience, necessary clicks or steps, must be smartphone-specific.

**Embrace disruption.** For millennials, finding ways for technology to enhance processes is a reflex. It's what they do, and the more attached they are to your school, the more likely they are to find disruptive opportunities. Let them. Odds are it will improve the experience for all parents.

**Don't neglect face to face.** Millennials weren't born with smartphones in their hands and laptops in their cribs. They relish personal communication. Maximize the opportunities for in-person contact. They will be the most appreciated and the most effective.

The most important strategy in reaching out to millennials is to accept them for who they are. Don't judge them, and don't try to change them. Rather, find approaches to engage and welcome millennials. With that in mind, you can use the strategies above as presented or as inspiration to find your school's unique means of maximizing the millennial moment.

LAURA SHERIDAN

# Your Marketing Questions— Answered

IN MY EXPERIENCE WORKING WITH TWO-DOZEN JEWISH DAY SCHOOLS ACROSS NORTH AMERICA TO DRIVE ENROLLMENT AND IMPROVE RETENTION, I'VE LEARNED THIS: MARKETING A JEWISH DAY SCHOOL IN 2018 IS HARD.

You have multiple target audiences, from educators and administrators to board members, parents, alumni and students. You have a product that requires continuous improvement to stay competitive. You have limited time, talent and money. And you have aggressive metrics to meet.

You are passionate about igniting curiosity and creating a love of learning. You know the impact of positive buzz and want to know how to make it happen. You know the challenges. Where do you begin?

Here are the most common questions I hear from Jewish day school administrators—and the answers.

## QUESTION #1

*How do we get parents to read our emails?*

You spend hours collecting content for each email, drafting engaging and fresh copy, and then hit “send,” only to end up ignored. How do you break through so parents read your emails?

It starts with understanding what your target audience, in this case, parents, cares about. How do you determine that? You conduct research.

Many of you have conducted parent surveys. I've read several that are too long and don't stay true to the survey goals. Before you send out the next one, ask yourself:

- Am I asking the right questions?
- Am I asking the right people?
- Am I using the right research tool?
- Would I spend the time to answer this survey?

Survey fatigue is a growing problem facing data collectors (that's you). How can you avoid survey fatigue?

- Don't over-survey your audience.
- Communicate why the respondents (parents) are being asked to complete the survey, how long it will take to complete it (preferably three minutes or less), and how the data will be used.
- Make it easy to answer the questions by using logic to skip over questions, and ensuring the survey performs well on mobile devices.
- Be ruthless about only asking questions that will help meet your survey goals. Cut the “nice to know” questions. If you want to know how to best reach parents, then ask a direct, easy to answer question such as:  
*How would you like [School Name] to communicate with you on a weekly basis? Please rank these communication methods from 1 (most desirable) to 5 (least desirable).*  
 Email  Facebook  Twitter  School website  Text
- Use third-party online survey software such as SurveyMonkey, which tracks responses and provides easy-to-analyze charts and reports.
- Include a question about email content in the parent survey. Provide choices and ask parents to rank their interest.

After the survey is conducted, share the themes that surfaced with the respondents when you thank them for participating. Then, when you make changes to your parent emails, it's important to explain that the upgrades were made based on their input.

Once you know how parents want to receive your communications and what interests them, then you're ready to develop a template and the content.

## QUESTION #2

*Some of our flyers and materials look great; others are just okay. With limited time and resources, what can we do to produce consistently high-quality materials?*

There are often many people at a school developing flyers and marketing materials. It's difficult to produce materials that use the same visual and verbal brand assets.

Creating a strong brand is all about frequency and consistency. How can you create materials that are high quality and consistent?

- Develop professionally designed templates and require that everyone at your school use them. Identify one brand champion who monitors usage to ensure people are using the appropriate template for each communication. Using a third-party email marketing service like MailChimp, Vertical Response or Constant Contact is a must. These services track all activity, have high deliverable rates, and provide automated reports you can use to analyze and optimize results.
- Develop a repository of your school's brand language. Identify one brand champion, ideally the same one you identified above, to ensure that your brand language is current. This document needs to include one way to describe your school's mission, one way to describe why your school is different and better, one way to describe your school's educational philosophy, effective calls-to-actions, etc.
- Develop a repository of your school's brand assets. Again, identify who is responsible for your school's library of brand assets, from your logo to infographics and professional photos.
- Repurpose your messaging. Copy and paste. Don't rewrite.

## QUESTION #3

*Our website is old and tired. Do we need a new one?*

I love hearing this question. It means that a school is thoughtfully considering the investment before hiring a website designer and developer.

Start by taking inventory of the following:

- Who is the primary target market? Is it for parents of students attending the school? Is it for prospective parents? Is it for donors? Is it for potential staff? You likely have multiple target audiences. Prioritization is key.
- What is the purpose of the website? If the primary target audience is current parents, then is the purpose to provide them with detailed information about upcoming events? Is it to remind them of the amazing educational experience their children are receiving? Is it to explain a new twist to the curriculum?
- What do you want people to do after they check out the site? Attend an event? Apply online? Donate? Share content?
- How will you measure the effectiveness of the site? What metrics are you collecting today? What have you learned from them? (If you aren't using Google Analytics, start tracking data today! It's easy to set up, and the data and reports are invaluable.)
- How big a problem is it? A new site takes a lot of time and money. Is it a priority?

Then, evaluate your current site against your checklist. Does the site, or can it with tweaks, meet your objectives? What is the cost to develop a new site? What would it take in terms of an increase in enrollment, retention or donor dollars to achieve an acceptable return on investment?

## QUESTION #4

*Is our Facebook page effective?*

All schools need a Facebook page. The school's brand champion (see above) needs to be the administrator of this page. That will ensure that the look and messaging will be consistent with all of the school's marketing materials.

Effectiveness for a school's Facebook page is measured by engagement. Are parents responding to posts? Are prospective parents watching videos? Are grandparents answering polls?

Here are ways to create engagement.

- Develop and rotate content about:
  - Students: Information about students at the school that promotes the individuals, not the school.
  - Events: Information about school happenings.
  - Staff/administrators/volunteers: Shout-outs to mission moments, such as amazing accomplishments or new program kickoffs, made possible by staff, administrators, volunteers and others.
  - Relevant trends: Articles from respected third parties on topics that are relevant and valued by your primary target audience, such as a new trend about children's eating habits and long-term health or the cognitive, lifelong benefits associated with learning a second language.
- Feature only high-quality photographs.
- Make sure all content is up-to-date.
- Include photos and quotes from school leaders to demonstrate their accessibility and the school's transparency.

Most importantly, measure engagement. Consider every post a test and monitor engagement. That will guide your content development.

Marketing a Jewish day school is challenging. Start with research to hear what's important to your target audience. Then, test what you learn, refine and test again.

RACHEL ARCUS-GOLDBERG  
TALI ZELKOWICZ

# The Story Behind Creating Our Story

*THERE'S SOMETHING SPECIAL ABOUT THIS SCHOOL. THIS HAD BEEN OUR TAG LINE FOR OVER SEVEN YEARS. AFTER OUR FIRST VISITS AT THE SCHOOL, BOTH OF US BELIEVED IT WHOLEHEARTEDLY. OUR DIRECTOR OF ADMISSIONS AND MARKETING, AN ALUMNI PARENT HERSELF, ALSO BELIEVED IT DEEPLY. AND OUR STAFF AND FACULTY, AS WELL AS LONG TIME PARENTS, KNEW IT. BUT ALL OF THESE PEOPLE SHARE ONE IMPORTANT TRAIT: THEY HAVE ALREADY BEEN IN THE BUILDING, MANY TIMES. AND EVEN IF SOMEONE CAME THROUGH THE DOOR AND COULD FEEL WHAT WAS SPECIAL, FEW COULD USE SPECIFIC, NON-JARGON LANGUAGE TO NAME POWERFULLY JUST WHAT THAT "SPECIAL SOMETHING" WAS.*



This lack of clarity around what made CJDS special was amplified by the fact that in the school's almost-20-year history, it had never allowed itself to proclaim with pride and clarity from the rooftops of Central Ohio what it was and why it existed. Recognizing this dilemma allowed us to overcome the many cautions we received from heads of other small Jewish day schools about investing limited funds in professional marketing materials. In the majority view, it just wasn't worth the money. What was? Ambassadorship. That was what they all unanimously recommended over marketing.

After many in-depth conversations with trusted colleagues at day schools large and small across the country, we saw that ambassadorship was, indeed, an answer to the key challenges of recruitment and retention. But there was a catch: Effective ambassadors must know what they are communicating, how to communicate it, and above all, *why* their cause is so important. As Simon Sinek of TED TALK fame has put it, we needed to learn how to "communicate with people's guts."

So, we sought ways to find our voice. We knew that we wanted our voice to be *true, unapologetic and memorable*. We needed to find a group of creatives who could help us capture the imaginations of a wide range of families who might be mission-appropriate but not know it. We found Fechtor Advertising, a local advertising firm whose work was consistently true, unapologetically bold and memorable. They had just provided the

Columbus Jewish Family Services agency with a branding makeover. If they could message heavy content like refugees and Holocaust survivors with bold, memorable, and even playful images and text such as, "We're more than 3800 years old. We understand what it takes to care for seniors," all the more so, we reasoned, could they do great things for a community liberal Jewish day school.

The process took eight months, start to print. We contracted with Fechtor to produce a viewbook with a new tag line (whose content could, in turn, be used by us or them to produce a brochure, ads, posters, banners, annual reports, fundraising materials) and to redo our website with the same look and voice of the viewbook. But the time spent finding that voice, at least five months, was easily as valuable as the product itself and spent in what advertisers call "discovery." Discovery included developing the overarching *brand strategy* and the resulting *creative strategy* (both defined below).

From our point of view, these crucial months were the thorough, probing, soul searching "self-study" we needed so badly. It was like receiving the most gratifying philosophical and conceptual massage, as they worked out kinks and tensions that had for years prevented the school from communicating its tremendous depth and complexity in elegant, accessible and visually stunning ways.

Fechtor's team engaged in online interviews, came to the school in person to feel the "something special," pored over a 2013

Columbus Jewish demographic study, reviewed a recent sample grant application, studied our staff and faculty bios, and read pages of testimonials about “Why choose CJDS?” and select excerpts from Abraham Joshua Heschel, whose teaching and thinking serve as the foundation for our school philosophy. Most significantly, however, they engaged in 30- to 60-minute interviews with more than 20 individual founders, alumni parents, alumni students, grandparents, staff and faculty, board members, donors, and community members and leaders. They processed all of that data and presented us with a first draft of a brand strategy by last June.

A brand strategy is your reason for being; it should differentiate you from others and be true to an enduring essence of the organization. At least for this firm, a brand strategy consists of Purpose, Values, Personality, Positioning and Promise. Each of those five components went through several drafts and edits; although that work usually remains unpublished, the process of formulating these items is an invaluable exercise, one that anchors everything that follows. The final iteration of our Purpose and our Promise did go public and can be found in the viewbook:

*We exist to strengthen the Jewish community and the world by helping to develop thinking, feeling, centered, whole people. ... We promise to give your child the foundation that he or she needs to add real value to relationships, life, and the world.*

The next step was to develop our creative strategy, which has the specific objective of

speaking to the “kishkes” of our target audiences through words and pictures (target audiences include parents, potential students, donors, alumni, existing students and grandparents). It includes the single most important thing you want people to both think and feel. As Fechter put it to us, “The value of the brand is to stand for something, and the value of the creative strategy is to be able to talk to all different people and target audiences.”

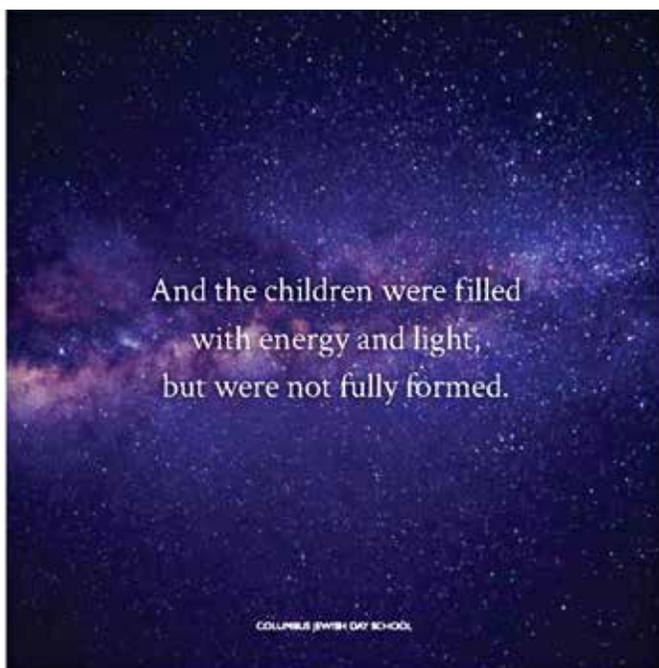
By last August, we were presented with three distinct campaign options, which led with three different voices: Critical Thinking, Menschlichkeit and Joy. All three spoke truths about us; we had to choose one and only one. No mashups allowed (we asked). Each had a different aesthetic, color palette, format, and ultimately, story to tell. Joy grabbed all of us instantaneously, but it also terrified us. The other two, Critical Thinking and Menschlichkeit, felt the *safest* stories to tell. While absolutely central to our values and practice, Critical Thinking and Menschlichkeit felt similar if not identical to stories told by our local non-Jewish independent and public schools and other Jewish day schools.

The story we hadn’t told was how much fun it was to learn in a Jewish day school, how cool it was to blend Jewish and general learning daily, in all sorts of new and contemporary ways. At CJDS, we often talk about our curriculum as being one that allows our students to grow into their authentic selves—not as sometimes Jewish and sometimes “general,” but all of it, all the time. Our new viewbook depicted that story with language such as, “In the beginning, there was Kindergarten. And

the children were filled with energy and light, but were not fully formed.” They used the language of Torah to produce “punchlines” that took classical, ancient text for playful spins. This campaign immediately felt right to us, but it also felt risky. Would it offend people? Confuse them? Freak them out?

We banked everything on “no.” But it wasn’t easy to take that leap. Together with board members who joined us at this final decision-making stage, we all decided that we hadn’t engaged in this process to tell someone else’s story. It took tremendous courage, both because of the message itself and the manner in which it was being told. But it was clear that everyone felt and knew deeply that this story was uniquely ours, and that was ultimately what empowered us to move forward.

Even after we made the leap to choose Joy, we spent about two more months emailing and phone conferencing with our marketing partners, editing each line and commenting upon each word on each spread. Seemingly small choices proved capable of changing an entire philosophy. To take just one example: The fifth spread in the viewbook originally read, “And a leader emerged among the children of Israel. For she had wit, and charm, and intelligence—and really good cookies.” The image we had for that text initially showed a much younger first-grade boy, for whom “cookies” made more sense. But even for a young boy, we did not feel that “really good cookies” was as strong a playful spin, or as aligned with our CJDS soul. So we searched for a new image and landed on one of a sixth-grade girl that allowed us to feature our commitment to



And a leader emerged among the children of Israel. For she had wit, and charm, and intelligence – and a righteous playlist.

COLUMBUS JEWISH DAY SCHOOL



egalitarian values. We wrote to them that the cookies line no longer has “anything to do with the [girl’s] leadership traits, and, actually serves to undermine the feminist message.” After much back and forth, a new “punchline” eventually emerged: “And a leader emerged among the children of Israel. For she had wit, and charm, and intelligence – and a righteous playlist.” Thus, we were able to further root the content in the students’ actual lived, contemporary American realities and our core values.

This is but one of several examples of how having time towards the end of the process to sleep on the wording, and to arrive at the right marriages between image and message, was so essential. Even the cover was still emerging through September, and by October we had changed some word or comma in no fewer than half of the 10 spreads. But thank goodness we had a hard deadline of our November Open House, to ensure the viewbook finally went to print. Shortly thereafter, we also went live with our new website ([www.cjds.org](http://www.cjds.org)).

Our team at Fechter Advertising has been as proud and excited about their product as we are. Indeed, of the six awards they won at the 2018 American Advertising Awards, one was for the CJDS Viewbook, which also snagged the coveted Judge’s Choice Award. CJDS was featured in a *Business Journal* slideshow covering the highlighted winners.

We believe there are at least six aspects of the relationship with Fechter that contributed to a final product that leads every constituent who sees it, be they alumni, founders, board members, or current parents and faculty, to report the following experience: “They totally got us.”

- From the beginning, it was clear Fechter was “hooked” on who we are and what we stand for. In fact, instead of interviewing a handful of the dozens of names we gave them as was the original plan, they were so taken, they talked with *all* of them. At the same time, we also appreciated what they stood for; we trusted their creative process and knew what we were getting in their creative values.
- Our team of three staff and, by design, no more—director of admissions and marketing, the principal and the head of school—met regularly and almost always in person with Fechter’s same team of two or three creative executives.
- Fechter pushed us hard to make excruciating values clarifications. And we trusted them, allowing them to do it even, especially, when it felt scary and risky.
- We pushed back hard to clarify who we are and who we are not, and we explained why every time.
- Fechter asked us for feedback and notes on every stage. And we gave it to them each time, in a coherent voice. We never made them communicate with multiple committees or manage divergent opinions among us. (We resolved those issues internally.)
- The timeline for production was visited (and when necessary, revisited) collaboratively and explicitly.

Overall, for CJDS, the “ambassadorship vs. marketing” dilemma necessitated a *both-and* solution. While we have begun working on our ambassador program in the past few years, our primary focus has been on marketing. And it has worked! We have worked

with our faculty, board members, parent organization and families to have a unified message about what the school does and where it is going. We have distributed our viewbook to hundreds of families throughout Central Ohio. We are hearing in person from parents of very diverse backgrounds that they love reading this storybook.

Just as important, we are also learning that their kids love reading our storybook, which was one of the conscious hopes of our design. We imagined children curling up in bed with our viewbook, turning through the pages and imagining themselves in the story. It has also become the ideal talking piece for potential donors and for recruiting potential new lay leaders. Although it is still early in the long ongoing arc that is recruitment, we do see that we are beginning to capture people’s imaginations *before* they set foot on campus. Over and over, we hear that there is a buzz throughout the community and that it is positive, energized and exciting. Our enrollment is up at least 20% for our incoming kindergarten class. It is hard to know what have been the most significant factors, but we are quite confident that we could never have generated this buzz throughout the community without a clear, bold, story to tell that reflects deeply who we are.

Next, we are looking to a program like Atidenu, Prizmah’s strategic recruitment and retention intensive, to maximize the power of our new story and take ambassadorship to a whole new level, now that we can say and *show* who we are and why we exist.

DANIEL CHIAT  
 DAN PERLA  
 TRACI STRATFORD

# What Current—and Prospective— Jewish Day School Parents Think About Day School

SINCE 2008, MORE THAN 50,000 PARENTS, REPRESENTING CHILDREN IN OVER 100 JEWISH DAY SCHOOLS, HAVE PARTICIPATED IN THE PEJE-MEASURING SUCCESS (MS) PARENT SURVEY. THOUSANDS MORE HAVE PROVIDED CRITICAL FEEDBACK ON THEIR NEEDS, PRIORITIES AND PERCEPTIONS THROUGH SURVEYS DESIGNED BY INDIVIDUAL SCHOOLS. THE MOST SUCCESSFUL JEWISH DAY SCHOOLS ARE ABLE TO ACT ON THREE OR MORE KEY THEMES EMANATING FROM A PARENT SURVEY AND SEE STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENT ON THOSE THEMES IN SUBSEQUENT SURVEYS.

The themes that most consistently emerge from existing day school parents include the following: a desire to enroll their children in a school that meets their desired level of Jewishness; a requirement that schools are academically strong and prepare their children for their next academic experience; school responsiveness to parental concerns. While the weight of each of these three parental themes varies from school to school, and while other themes often come into play for an individual school, a focus on these three broad themes has been shown to increase the likelihood that these parents will recommend the school to others.

But research needs to extend beyond the pool of current parents. With many day schools facing acute enrollment challenges, and with traditional student feeder channels becoming more unpredictable due to the proliferation of stronger public schools and charter schools and better-resourced private schools, it is critical that day schools use surveys and other data collection tools to collect and analyze data from *prospective* parents. Toward that end, Prizmah and Measuring Success have engaged in two collaborative efforts to collect and analyze data from thousands of potential day school parents. While the findings from these non-parent surveys aren't always consistent across different communities, it is clear that the voices of these potential parents should be heeded; both school-level and community-level recruitment/marketing efforts must be modified to address the particular needs and desires of a wider range of potential day school parents. What follows is a description of each of the two collaborations, a summary of the findings, and recommendations for next steps in data collection and analysis.

## CHICAGO GROWTH PROGRAM

Working with four non-Orthodox day schools in the Chicago market, the Chicago Growth Program is premised on the hypothesis that day schools in the same city can increase their enrollment of non-Orthodox children and better their perception in the community by engaging in data-driven decision making. The program's hypothesis is that data collection and analysis of prospective day school parents can help identify some of the misperceptions of and negative views toward day schools. Once these misperceptions are identified, both community-level and school-level marketing efforts can be implemented in an effort to correct these negative misperceptions.

The first stage of this program involved recruitment of Chicago schools to participate in the program. With the goal to increase numbers of non-Orthodox children in Jewish day schools in mind, invitations were extended to all Chicago-area schools, and ultimately four non-Orthodox schools enrolled. The second stage involved the surveying of hundreds of non-day school parents from the membership rolls of the Chicago JCC, individual synagogues, the PJ Library program and Chicago's federation (JUF). The data suggests three areas in which the parents surveyed put day schools behind other schools in the Chicagoland area.

**Academic excellence:** Chicago's private and more elite public schools were seen as stronger academic institutions. **Teaching excellence:** Teachers in Jewish day schools were seen as not as well trained or experienced. **Graduate preparedness:** Jewish day school graduates were perceived as not as well prepared or likely to be accepted into highly selective Chicago area high schools or premier universities.

Armed with these data, and with generous funding support from the Crown Foundation and an anonymous sponsor, Prizmah hired a prominent Chicago marketing firm (Resolute Consulting) to develop a community-wide campaign to address these three areas. The firm was also employed to work one-on-one with each school, training the school's admissions team to target their messages more effectively by addressing misconceptions that surfaced through the survey.

Resolute advocated for the creation of a dedicated website to help "make the case" for Jewish day schools in Chicago. Visitors could link to any of the four schools through the site, too. Resolute held a video contest on the website ([www.discoverjewishdayschools.com](http://www.discoverjewishdayschools.com)) in order to build traffic on the new site. Resolute also launched and actively managed a Facebook page for the new URL; ran radio sponsorship messages on WBEZ, the local NPR station, during recruitment season; placed full-page ads placed in the JUF News, the Midwest's largest circulated Jewish community publication; and found other platforms to share the academic, teaching and graduate successes of the schools in the program. The marketing efforts included highlighting a variety of statistics on a number of academic factors deemed important to prospective parents. These included standardized test scores, in particular science and math; the high acceptance rate of day school graduates into Chicago's prestigious high schools; and faculty and staff with esteemed credentials, awards and fellowships. Resolute examined the schools' websites and placed greater emphasis on the schools' academic strength while showcasing the success of their graduates.

Even as the communal website and individual school sites continue to emphasize the importance of Jewish values and character building in their efforts, school admissions professionals have come to appreciate the impact that a greater focus on academics can have on dispelling the misperceptions that exist among prospective parents. The program has given schools the tools to put their best foot forward by promoting their academic strength. Though outside the current parameters of the program, a follow-up survey of many of the initial survey respondents (as well as new respondents) would be helpful to determine the degree to which the community-level and school-level efforts have helped to change misperceptions and increase the likelihood of prospective parents to enroll their children in a Chicago day school.

## BECHIRAH ELYONA

With generous funding provided by AVI CHAI, Bechirah Elyona involved 12 Jewish high schools across 10 communities. The program bore certain resemblances to the Chicago program, though it specifically targeted full-pay families in an effort to help schools recruit families whose tuition levels would allow schools to invest in quality improvements. Surveys were once again conducted in conjunction with local JCCs, synagogues and other Jewish institutions. One positive by-product of this research effort is that it resulted in larger-scale community advocating. Schools had obvious reasons for participating in the project, but the JCCs and synagogues less so. Yet these organizations came to understand that their willingness to disseminate the survey to their members would enable them to gain valuable insight on the educational priorities of their members. In some cases, the partnerships rekindled dormant

relationships and enabled the community organizations to become stronger advocates for Jewish day school education.

The survey results foregrounded some similar considerations among parents of high school-aged children across the 12 participating schools. While prospective full-pay high school families generally value schools with strong academics, they also look for a high school that is strong in character development. The Bechirah findings showed that prospective full-pay families also perceive Jewish high school to be stronger in the area of character development than its local competition, giving schools a sense of what they "do" that currently has high value and high perception. An additional finding that could be a strong selling point for day schools is that affinity is an important factor in high school selection; parents want their children to attend the same schools as their friends and acquaintances. Among negative findings, however, secular academics is typically perceived as weaker than the competition. The survey also found a widespread perception that Jewish high schools are weaker in the credentials of their faculty and the innovative quality of their curricula.

In addition to understanding what is important for families in making a high school choice and how Jewish schools compare to other options, the Bechirah study aimed to determine which school-choice factors actually increase the likelihood that prospective full-pay families will choose a Jewish high school. In other words, beyond moving toward a level playing field compared with other options, what can serve as the difference makers in choosing a Jewish high school? Here, the key findings were much more nuanced and community-dependent. For example, in certain communities, the more the Jewish high school demonstrates student selectivity, the likelihood to enroll in Jewish high school increases among prospective full-pay families. In other communities, the degree to which these prospective families believe the school has positive social dynamics among students can serve as a tipping point for the selection of Jewish high school.

In addition to providing the 12 high schools with the names and emails of the survey respondents for follow-up, the data, nuanced though it may be, should enable these schools to adjust their programming, marketing and/or messaging based on the unique desires and values of these families. Some of the schools may focus more on academics, including a greater emphasis on positive alumni outcomes, while others may focus on the profile and values of families attending their school. Nearly all have or will develop parent ambassador programs. Others are considering ways to partner with local independent schools so that additional course offerings can be made available to their students, with the added bonus of enhancing their secular academics.

While the process may be time-consuming (and costly), it is critical that day schools collect and analyze survey data from potential parents. Understanding the needs, wants and desires of these potential parents can help schools dramatically expand the funnel of families considering their schools. While certain findings are consistent across most communities and others may vary considerably from school to school and community to community, an understanding of the top few factors that drive parental perceptions is a critical first step to creating customized and targeted marketing and messaging to a wider variety of parents.

# What makes your school GREAT?



My school is special because my school has chickens. We feed the chickens. The chickens lay eggs. We use the eggs to make challah. We do mitzvahs and we share the challah with our friends.

**Adan, Kindergarten**  
B'nai Israel Community Day School,  
Gainesville, Florida



My teachers make our school great. This is a picture of Morah Debbie. She makes me feel special. She makes me feel like a mathematician. She starts by giving me easy things and then they get harder and harder. It gets a little harder each time, but not too hard all at once and so my brain gets bigger and bigger. My school is great because it gives me recess time so I get to wiggle my body and play sports. I can be active, run really fast and get fresh air, and then come back and be serious about my learning. All my teachers show me they care about me. They help me first, and then I know I can do it when I'm alone. They show me what a mitzvah is and how to do it. I hold the door for people and clean up my room without being asked, because I learned how to be a mensch. I feel good and really proud of myself.

**Ur Shereshevsky, Kindergarten**  
Hebrew Day School of Ann Arbor



At our school, we take time to celebrate our history and Jewish heritage in fun and exciting ways. On Purim, all students are encouraged to come dressed in costume and be ready to have fun. At the lower school, the fifth graders work hard for a month in planning the Purim carnival. In the upper school, we have multiple megillah readings, and students are able to select which reading they would like to attend. Another special thing is the school's Purim shpiel, performed interactively and with great humor by the math department. The shpiel includes the year's hottest trends and slang, raps, teachers getting pie in the face and more, which gets the students laughing out loud. We finish the day off with a carnival, where we hang out with our friends. The way we celebrate Purim is just one of the ways our school helps us kvelling and celebrating our traditions, religion and community.

**Julia Peppe, Grade 8**  
Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School, Rockville, Maryland



People think that everybody is the same at our school. They think that everyone comes from a modern Orthodox background and that we look the same in our uniforms. But we find ways to express our individuality. Our students come from a variety of different places and religious backgrounds, yet we all get along and work together. Even our shoes tell a story of who we are and what we like.

**Raya Sulman, Grade 6**  
Robert M. Beren Academy, Houston



The music room represents some of my favorite school activities. I like music! During music, we do all sorts of activities such as singing songs, playing instruments and musical games. We sing songs in Hebrew and in English, and every grade participates. Every year the school has a Kabbalat Shabbat devoted to music, where we can play an instrument or sing a song. This year, I was in it. I played the ukulele and sang. I am also a part of the choir, which is led by our music teacher, Mr. Angelo. The music room is so fun and welcoming, and it represents all of my favorite happenings at our school.

**Billie Sunshine, Grade 5**  
Columbus Jewish Day School,  
Columbus, Ohio

Pictured here is our Beit Kneset, where on Monday and Thursday the middle school meets together for tefillah. We fill this room with loud, spirited prayer; it gives the whole middle school a place free from the pressures of classes, so we can express our spirituality. Additionally, because the tefillah is in the morning, it wakes us up and energizes us through communal prayer.

**Akiva L., Grade 8**  
JCDS, Boston's Jewish  
Community Day School



Not only do our teachers care, they pay attention to us in an effort to actively shape us into the best people we can be. It's not just about academics, either. Our teachers are interested in us as people, and as athletes, artists and musicians—and anything else we strive to become. Our school is typical insofar as it is filled with a variety of students, all unique. Yet the makeup of our student body allows for those differences to be embraced, which lends itself to fostering friendships that (hopefully) will last forever. The school gives us opportunities to excel in our strengths and the space to learn new subjects. Our head of school often talks about "building tomorrow's leaders": I see my peers and believe I'm surrounded by tomorrow's game-changers. It makes me confident in a future where signs of hope are seemingly fleeting.

**Hannah Resnick, Grade 10**  
Frankel Jewish Academy, Farmington Hills, Michigan

I moved here only a few years ago, but now I feel like I've been living here forever. When I first came to our school, I didn't know anyone and had never been to Cleveland before, but everyone was so nice to me, everyone welcomed me and made me feel like I really belonged, even before the first day was over. Everyone bonds, welcomes, helps and sympathizes, growing and strengthening the community. It's not just the students, it's also all the teachers and staff who really make the school special. They teach us in our classrooms, and they also invite us into their homes and serve as role models for us. The community extends beyond the school building and beyond the school day: Everyone goes to the same places, hangs out together, and has a great time! It's not just a school, it's a community!

**Abby Liska, Grade 7**  
Fuchs Mizrahi School, Beachwood, Ohio



In order to have a successful school, you need two things: meaningful values, and loving teachers to pursue these values. I showed this in my picture. You can see our school's values listed in the background, some in English some in Hebrew, on the wall on the back of one of our buildings. In the foreground, you can see the teachers who teach these values to us, the students, in different ways. Together, the background and foreground make our school great.

**Alon Knaan, Grade 6**  
Gideon Hausner Jewish Day School, Palo Alto, California



Our school is incomparable because it is a community where everyone is welcome and plays an important part. The picture above is a school mural. The inside circle shows the many generations of our school community. The eldest generations are blessing the youngest generations. Underneath the image are the words *lead vador*, "from generation to generation." Our school really embraces this idea. We know the importance of each generation learning from one another. This mural is also significant because of how it was created. Everyone, including teachers, students, parents, siblings and grandparents worked together on the mural. It was truly a community project that embodied the idea of how community is crucial to our school.

**Liora Ragozin and Orli Gold, Grade 5**  
Epstein Hillel School



Our school is a great place because it gives back to the community. Not only does it provide a great academic education, it also teaches us to accept and acknowledge differences. The individuals pictured come from an organization called JCHAI, which helps grown-ups with various developmental delays. Our school invites them to volunteer. They love volunteering and spending time with us. Through regular interaction with JCHAI members, I have come to feel more comfortable with people with differences and have learned the value of an inclusive community. Perelman helps these individuals feel a sense of purpose, and that is one reason why our school is great!

**Asher Decherney, Grade 5**  
Perelman Jewish Day School,  
Elkins Park, Pennsylvania



When I entered the school in kindergarten, I was nervous, but after meeting the bunny, Hamudi, my fears vanished. Feeling at ease provided me with opportunities to make new friends. What makes my school special is everything it provides; it provides afterschool activities, has you speaking English and Hebrew like a pro. It also provides opportunities to make new friends. The school is so friendly, the students have become lifelong friends, and with the teachers and guidance, I am able to learn and grow. After six years, I still love my school, and it means everything to me.

**Emily Friedlander, Grade 5**  
Kinneret Day School, Bronx, New York



Our school is a warm and supportive community that offers students incredible chances to share their voices with the world. Our rabbis teach us that words are powerful and can be used to help, heal or hurt. All it takes is one word to make someone's day a little better. Throughout the years, students have many opportunities to use their words to share thoughts and ideas. From a young age, students interpret prayers and the Torah and present their ideas during Kabbalat Shabbat. In fourth grade, students read original poems to friends and relatives. Middle school students use their voices as members of the student council, which makes important decisions to help make the school a better place. The teachers value the opportunities students have to share their voices and ensure that every voice is heard. We are grateful for all the support and encouragement as we learn the importance of using our voices to positively affect the world around us.

**Lucy and Nora Rayman, Grade 5**  
Rodeph Shalom School, New York City

This is not a picture of me and my classmates eating churros on Cinco de Mayo. This is also not a picture of me and my friends eating churros on Cinco de Mayo. This is a picture of me and my family. I've been going to the school since I was four, and my sister goes there too. We love it for many reasons, such as the wonderful teachers, the good education and how kind people are to newcomers, but we love it mostly because of how everyone knows everyone. Staff and students alike are incredibly close. This creates an environment where we all feel important and safe. The people at school are the people who can laugh with you and cry with you, who do science fair projects with you and who go out to the movies with you. They are the people who steal a bite of your churro, who then feel bad and give you a bite of their churro in return. This is my family.

**Zoe Lachter, Grade 7**  
Jewish Day School of the Lehigh Valley, Allentown, Pennsylvania





Do you know who that is? That is my mom, or as I call her, my Imma. Rockwern is my family, it is my home. Every day I walk through the halls, and I think of how it used to be when my mom went here years ago. I am in the second to oldest grade this year. I have memories that warm me inside from the day my mom introduced me to Rockwern, with my brother at my side. I look at the walls of old and new graduates and the beautiful artwork. Every corner is filled with happiness and joy. Filled with Judaism and prayers. Rockwern is a special place with family and friends. That is what I think of every time I see this picture.

**Jordana Ronis-Tobin, Grade 5**  
Rockwern Academy, Cincinnati



A true kehillah (community) is not one that advocates a single school of thought, but rather one that finds value in different points of view, welcoming unique perspectives to build a greater whole. Our school fosters a culture that celebrates diversity in thought, giving students the platform to challenge themselves, their peers and the administration in actively shaping their environment. Every week, the student body comes together to discuss relevant, socially conscious topics. After the tragedy in Parkland, Florida, the administration provided a safe forum for students to share their opinions on current events. Student panelists representing a wide array of personal viewpoints discussed these issues, and audience members had the opportunity to ask questions and comment. This same approach shines through in many other areas, as seen in its plethora of tefillah options and student-run clubs, all of which allow every student to express her/himself both Judaically and secularly in a truly meaningful manner.

**Josiah Gilbert and Aidan Golub, Grade 11**  
Solomon Schechter School of Westchester, Hartsdale, New York



I chose to take this photo because at our school we "grow together." Like plants, we start out as seedlings and grow to trees or flowers. To grow like a plant you need to be nurtured. At our school, teachers teach, you play with friends and get to participate in fun activities with the whole school. As a student, I grow when I get taught, I grow when I play with friends, and I grow when I do fun activities. My photo shows all the things that help me grow.

**Sarah N., Grade 5**  
Shalom School, Sacramento, California



What's great about my school is that while students learn about Judaism, at the same time they learn how to work together with children of all ages. Here is a picture of an eighth grader, Orly S., reading to a kindergartner, Julian A., a book called *Thank You, God!* This picture shows that the younger students are able to learn both from their teachers and from older students.

**Aya M., Grade 8**  
Solomon Schechter Day School of Metropolitan Chicago



Acceptance. Recognition. Those two words come to mind when I think of our school. For almost 40 years, at our beautiful campus, an environment of pure acceptance has been laced through its walls. Whether it is sitting with your friends at lunch, or participating in an engaging class conversation, every moment is one of acceptance. And that idea of acceptance is reflected in the school's policy of recognition, signs of which are found at every turn. We recognize great Jewish figures, represented by the naming of the Maimonides Upper School and Golda Meir Lower School. Children lost in the Holocaust are recognized by ceramic butterflies scattering the walls. Students and teachers alike are recognized for their achievements during the morning announcements. And the strong matriarchs of the Jewish people are recognized in the colorful glint of statues in the Garden of Eden. These two aspects bring our school together in a way that is both loving and inviting. And when you look around at all these small, magnificent symbols, you are overwhelmed by one immense idea: You belong.

**Tikva Velazquez, Grade 11**  
San Diego Jewish Academy

# WHICH HAT DO I TAKE OFF?

I SERVE AS A MEMBER OF THE LEADERSHIP TEAM AT THE SAME SCHOOL MY TWO CHILDREN ATTEND. MY OLDER CHILD HAS NOT YET NEEDED ANY SPECIAL INTERVENTION FROM ME AS A PARENT, BUT MY YOUNGER CHILD, WHO BEGAN AT THE SCHOOL THIS YEAR, IS A DIFFERENT STORY. HER BEHAVIOR IN CLASS CAN BE A CHALLENGE TO HER TEACHERS, AND SHE IS GOING TO NEED BOTH SOCIAL AND ACADEMIC SUPPORT. I CAN FEEL THE TEACHERS SHYING AWAY FROM TALKING TO ME, AND I SENSE THAT THEY THINK I TREAT MY CHILDREN DIFFERENTLY THAN OTHER STUDENTS IN THE SCHOOL. HOW DO I KNOW WHEN TO WEAR MY “PARENT” HAT AND WHEN I NEED TO TAKE IT OFF?



**AMY WASSER**  
PRIZMAH'S DIRECTOR OF  
SCHOOL ADVOCACY

There are so many benefits to working at the same school that your children attend. With some thoughtful planning, those positives can outweigh the inevitable challenges that come with such an arrangement.

## FOR YOUR FAMILY

Make a plan in advance of expectations for parent/child interactions at school.

- Explain to your children, in an age-appropriate manner, that you will give them space at school. Let them know they can talk to you about this if it becomes a problem for them.
- Establish clear guidelines for when they can approach you, when they can ask you for things (“I forgot my lunch”), and when and if they are allowed in your office.
- Ensure they adhere to rules all students at the school must follow, including where they need to be during non-class time (before and after school). Be very clear with your children that there are no special rules for them just because you work at their school.
- Make sure that you follow all expectations given to all parents.
- Talk at home must not broach school business of which your children should not be aware.
- Parents of your children's friends need to understand you are not their source of information about the school.
- If it works better for you, have another adult attend birthday parties for your children's day school friends.
- When at social occasions (bnai mitzvah, community events), be very careful to be professional, avoiding discussion of

school business, yet allow yourself to also be a part of the event. This can be a great balancing act!

## AT SCHOOL

Make a plan before the school year begins so that everyone understands protocols for communication.

- Set up expectations of how you are to be contacted. In general, you will want to be addressed in person or contacted like any other parent would be, via an email or phone call.
- Are you the first person to contact when your child needs something that is not an academic or behavior issue? If not, who is that person? This could be anything from a late permission form to needing more pencils to your child being out of dress code. Again, if you are the contact person, create expectations that you should be treated like other parents.
- Make a plan for academic and social/emotional issues. Be explicit. Who is the first person of contact: you? Another parent? A grandparent or provider (therapist)? If it is you, be sure it is handled like it would be for any other student. If it is another person, and contact is made via email, do you want to be copied?
- All meetings about your child should take place outside of school hours or whenever parent meetings normally take place.
- Make sure all staff and faculty know you want to be treated equally, like any other parent, when it comes to your children, and that you do not expect special treatment. They should also know that you want honesty, and that in turn you will be respectful of their roles.

- If a situation should arise where you feel your role as educational leader is being compromised—for example, you really feel the teacher is not implementing best practices for your school—bring in another administrator to help.
- Never sacrifice what is best for your child because of your role at the school. Seek assistance to find the right balance. If done with respect for both your role as parent and as educator, you will navigate to the right place.
- Always accept guidance and reach out to a trusted colleague to talk through a situation. If you have a coach, use that time to discuss what is happening.
- If ultimately the school is not the right match for your child, make that hard decision.

We learn in Tehillim, Psalms 119:99: *מכל מלמדי השכלתי*, From all my teachers I have gained insight. With every new experience between yourself, your children and their teachers—your colleagues—you will learn something new. Accept this role as one of development for yourself both as an educator and as a parent. If looked at as an opportunity for learning, the outcomes will be positive and enriching.

Take pleasure in knowing you get to experience, albeit from afar, the joys of watching your child's everyday interactions and growth. Acknowledge that also might come with having to step back when you don't like what you see. If you put a plan in place, when surprises happen—and they will—you will be all the better prepared. In the end, working in the same place where your child learns can be a source of great pleasure for your entire family.

# Why Teaching to Diverse Learners Is a Smart Equation

OFTEN WE HEAR THE CONCERN VOICED IN OUR DAY SCHOOL COMMUNITY, “IF WE BECOME TOO INCLUSIVE, AND HAVE TOO MANY STUDENTS WITH LEARNING NEEDS, WILL WE DEVELOP A REPUTATION AS A ‘SPECIAL NEEDS SCHOOL’ AND LOSE OTHER STUDENTS?” OR “ARE WE DIVERTING TOO MANY FUNDS TO A MINORITY OF THE SCHOOL’S POPULATION?” WE ALSO KNOW THAT SOME PARENTS BELIEVE THAT THEIR INTELLECTUALLY GIFTED CHILDREN WILL GET THE BEST POSSIBLE EDUCATION ONLY IF THEY GO TO SCHOOL WITH OTHER EQUALLY GIFTED STUDENTS.



ELIZABETH FOX  
RAFI KALMAN  
DEBBIE NIDERBERG

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In our collective experience (as educators, a school psychologist and members of Hidden Sparks, an organization that supports teachers working with diverse learners), and spanning a wide range of schools and based on data we have seen, we believe that just the opposite is true. Teachers and schools that sharpen their abilities to work with diverse learners raise the bar for all students, and academic and social-emotional success for even the top-performing students is increased. The following example illustrates the steps that one school took to be responsive to diverse learners, which resulted in enhanced differentiated instruction and transformed the classroom community for the other classmates.

Sam (all student names are changed) was a second grader at the Solomon Schechter School of Queens (SSSQ) who was admired by his peers for his sense of humor and athletic prowess and by his teachers for his polite and respectful manner. His math and reading skills were more than two grades below level. He had difficulty attending and was notorious among the faculty for his constant “water breaks.” One day, the administrator and director of student learning stayed in the hall and counted Sam leaving the room seven times in a two-hour span. Sam’s teachers had become exasperated by his inability to stay on task and believed that his behavior explained why he was performing below grade level.

The school’s Hidden Sparks coaches and Sam’s teachers identified him for observation. They found that his class was composed of students both significantly above and significantly below grade level. It became clear that Sam and others required a differentiated classroom environment that addressed their varied learning, attentional and emotional needs while tapping into the students’ strengths, such as, in Sam’s case, strong social skills. After visiting other schools

with blended programs, providing teachers with both external professional development and embedded support, the school's administration decided to pilot a blended learning classroom.

Upon the students' return from vacation, the second graders arrived to find a classroom with kidney-shaped tables in place of desks. Instead of 20 students being instructed by one teacher from the head of the room, students were broken into groups of no larger than four. Instead of one curriculum for the entire grade, each of these groups was taught at its own academic level. Further, these small groups allowed the teacher to be more in tune with individual students' emotional needs.

As the weeks unfolded, the administration observed and assisted in the classroom. While the class seemed to be running smoothly, the true measure of progress would be in the results. Would Sam and others function more effectively and perform better? The results significantly exceeded expectations and validated the school's faith in the pedagogical change. By the end of the year, 100% of the class demonstrated gains at least 20% above expected progress. Forty percent advanced 1.75 years in one year, and 20% of the class advanced 2.75 years in one year. At the beginning of the year, 46% of students in the class were at or above grade level; by the end, 93% of students were at or above grade level.

A few weeks after the implementation of the program, the school psychologist received a knock on his door from Sam's mother. She appeared to be crying, and the principal was concerned. Sam's mother quickly composed herself and exclaimed, "Sam got an 82 on a math test!" The school psychologist could not tell whether she was excited or upset. Noticing his confusion, she laughed and explained that it was the highest score Sam had ever received and that Sam was so proud of himself. Over the next few weeks, Sam's confidence began to soar, his "water breaks" decreased, and his academic performance improved dramatically. Today, a year and a half later, Sam is performing on grade level and is a confident young man.

Among many variables that played a role in Sam's growth, the key that shifted the school's strategy was changing the lens through which Sam was viewed: moving from identifying what he could not do to addressing his strengths and what he was capable of accomplishing. This shift in mindset predisposed the administrators and teachers at SSSQ to change the way the school approached teaching Sam and his classmates. Once the teachers and Hidden Sparks coach explored Sam's learning profile and the learning profiles of other students in the class, they understood how aspects of the children's personality and strengths could be addressed with more success through differentiated instruction. According to one administrator, "The blended, small group model enabled us to be more aligned with the learning needs of 100% of the students."

A similarly striking success is the Integrated Collaborative Co-Teaching (ICT) model at Hebrew Academy of Long Beach (HALB). In an effort to be more inclusive of students whose parents might otherwise opt to place their children in public schools or specialized programs because they felt HALB couldn't meet their children's needs, and faced with a 2%–3% drop each year between kindergarten and first grade, HALB decided to pilot the ICT inclusion program in their first grade. They brought in an additional teacher with a special education

background to co-teach in each of those classes, and they created heterogeneous groupings of six to seven students among which the teachers rotated.

The teachers engaged in collaborative lesson planning weekly and drew up individualized weekly goals for each student, based on the skill or subject matter the student was working on. They also introduced a weekly rating of goals that they used to track each student's progress. This data was not only helpful to the teachers in addressing lagging skills but also useful for providing specific, measurable feedback to parents. According to the lower school principal, "The entire room is getting an enhanced level of instruction, including the best kids. You're learning in smaller grouping ratios. You have much more focus on the individual needs."

Results based on a test administered three times a year were striking. Seventy-nine percent of all students in regular classrooms surpassed their target in math by 162%. In comparison, 100% of all students in the ICT classroom exceeded their expected growth in math by 170%. In addition, while 83% of high achievers in the regular classrooms met or exceeded their expected goals for math, fully 100% of high achievers in the ICT class did. In reading, 71% of all students in the ICT classroom increased their expected growth by 126%, while 60% of non-ICT students increased their expected growth by 139%. Meanwhile, 100% of high-achieving students in both the ICT class and regular classes reached their target. The top quarter of students in both the ICT classroom and regular classrooms nearly doubled their targets in math, from a 6.7-point boost to a 12.4-point boost (185%), and more than doubled their targets in reading, from a 7.5-point growth to a 17-point growth (226%). According to the principal, once parents heard about the class, there was a waiting list to get in.

Neither the blended and ICT models nor additional staffing may be the solution for all students or all schools. However, they are some of the ways to give teachers an opportunity to provide small-group targeted instruction, which is not possible in a class that is primarily workbook or lecture-based. What is common to both the blended model and the ICT program is the introduction of smaller heterogeneous groupings and a differentiated, more individualized approach and sensitivity.

These are both examples of how schools adopted wide-scale change in order to serve diverse learners more effectively. Yet we have also seen many examples of shifts in individual classrooms, where teachers adapted their teaching approach to address diverse learning needs, creating benefits for the entire class and boosting the teacher's confidence. Here's one example from a participating Hidden Sparks school in Florida, Katz Yeshiva High School, that is reflective of the kinds of gains we see across our broad range of participating schools.

Doni is a bright tenth grader who was engaged in many of his classes, but sat with his head down in Gemara and did not participate. Through an observation and inquiry guided by the Hidden Sparks coach, the coach and teacher realized that Doni's Hebrew decoding skills were weak and that he didn't have enough opportunities to successfully demonstrate his understanding of the content. They also observed that he exhibited real strengths in higher-order cognition. As a result of these observations, the coach and teacher explored alternative teaching approaches. Doni's teacher introduced a more

creative, critical thinking approach, teaching Gemara through having students participate in debates, develop related articles for the school newspaper, and create Instagram posts to represent different parts of the Gemara discussion. These changes enabled Doni to showcase his skills and to excel in Gemara and immediately boosted the engagement of Doni and many of the other students.

Once he gained a deeper understanding of how Doni learned and how to tap into Doni's strengths to address his struggles, Doni's teacher was able to differentiate his instructional approach to teaching the Gemara content more effectively to the other students.

This example supports the research of Carol Ann Tomlinson, a leading researcher and author on differentiation: "The teachers' goal is to maximize the capacity of each learner by teaching in ways that help all learners bridge gaps in understanding and skill and help each learner grow as much and as quickly as he or she can" (*Differentiation in Practice*). Tomlinson notes that "questions and tasks that are interesting to students are more likely to lead to enhanced student engagement with the task, the student's sense that the work involved is rewarding, greater evidence of student creativity, increased student productivity, a higher degree of student autonomy, and a higher level of intrinsic motivation."

National research has consistently supported the efficacy of differentiating instruction. For example, researchers at a Midwestern suburban elementary school and middle school found that the second-, third- and seventh-grade students improved their achievement dramatically in reading after only a semester of differentiated instruction. After the school began having students work in flexible groups or workshops three to five times per week, engage in 60 minutes or more of self-selected reading per week, and visit the school library, the percentage of second-, third- and seventh-grade students who read at or above grade level increased from 64% to 88%, from 48% to 89%, and from 16% to 64%, respectively. Tests conducted before and after the program also showed that as a result of differentiation, these students demonstrated a more positive disposition toward reading and greater confidence in themselves as readers.

The experience of some Jewish day schools makes a compelling case for the counterintuitive conclusion that the achievement level of gifted students actually increases when they are in heterogeneous classrooms, and that classrooms that are designed to support diverse learners benefit all students.

Too often in our Jewish day schools, students are "counseled out" if they don't meet behavioral or academic expectations. Too often such children must forgo a Jewish education and enroll in their local public school. While the models may be different, the experience of Solomon Schechter School of Queens, the Hebrew Academy of Long Island and Katz Yeshiva High School, supported by research in the field, makes a compelling case that classrooms that are attuned to individual students and designed to support diverse learners not only boost academic achievement for struggling learners, but consistently improve learning outcomes for all students, including those performing above grade level. Teaching to diverse learners is not merely a values-driven approach; it is a smart equation that yields net gains for all.

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ALYSSA WOLF

# Alumni: At the Corner of Engagement and Advocacy

OSCAR WILDE GOT IT RIGHT WHEN HE SAID THAT EXPERIENCE IS SIMPLY THE NAME WE GIVE OUR MISTAKES. THIS AXIOM HAS CERTAINLY PROVEN TO BE TRUE OVER THE PAST THREE YEARS, AS OUR SCHOOL EMPLOYED A RANGE OF TRADITIONAL ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES TO TRANSFORM INDIFFERENT ALUMNI—ESPECIALLY MILLENNIALS—INTO INVOLVED EMISSARIES. UNTIL RECENTLY, A GREAT DEAL OF EFFORT WAS SPENT PLANNING LARGER-SCALE EVENTS WITH PERCEIVED CACHET, WHICH SUPPORTED A SOMEWHAT-FLAWED THEORY THAT THE “RIGHT” EVENTS WOULD DRAW IN ALUMNI; THEY DIDN’T. WE WERE INITIALLY DUBIOUS WHETHER MORE CUSTOMIZED, PERSONAL TOUCH POINTS WOULD YIELD ANYTHING TANGIBLE; IN FACT, THEY DID.

As a pre-K to 8 institution, Schechter’s success rate in changing long-past young adult or young-parent alumni into “active campaigners” turned out to be particularly challenging. Take Sarah Schulman’s experience. A rising sculptor and installation artist with her own studio in New York City, the 2004 alumna cheerfully ignored the steady stream of emails and invites to attend premier Yankee games, hip barroom soirees and Sunday brunches. After a series of poor showings, we discovered that she, along with many of our alumni, was uninterested in paying for opportunities just to hang out with classmates from a school that had been relegated to her proverbial rear-view mirror.

We began to reframe our thinking. We looked for “win-win” opportunities to engage our alumni: opportunities that would provide a forum in which they could share their successes and, in turn, from which we could eventually cultivate long-term relationships. Here are some of the strategies that have worked.

## SHOWCASING ALUMNI SUCCESSES

We comb social media and query our parent and staff networks to track down alumni with interesting personal and professional stories. We then offer to feature them in the school’s alumni association newsletter, *Shelanu*, and on our alumni Facebook page. During the interview process, we ask questions about their personal and professional trajectory as a way to help them articulate the



impact Schechter has made on their lives. This worked for Sarah Schulman; she was delighted when invited to return to Schechter for a cover photo shoot with our veteran art educator, whom she credits with nurturing her passion for art. The experience gave her an opportunity to rekindle a bond she once had with a beloved teacher. It also renewed interest in her alma mater and gave her a chance to reflect on what she gained from her early academic experience.

During her interview with *Shelanu*, Schulman recalled that much of her installation work with remnants and scraps culled from around New York City is inspired by the Jewish value *bal tashchit* (not to destroy or waste), a concept she said she learned at Schechter. “In sixth grade we went on the *teva* (nature) retreat and were taught about our imperative to care of our planet; this is a sentiment I carry into my art today,” she said. Since then, Sarah has reconnected with classmates through a series of smaller, more informal gatherings, something she had not done in the 14 years since graduating from our school. Her interest and involvement in the school have been reawakened—and a potential future ambassador-cum-donor has been born.

## ALIGNING SCHOOL MISSION WITH SPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS

In late 2016, Jeremy Feigenbaum, class of 2003 and Harvard Law School graduate, was thrilled when asked to share his experiences as a clerk to United States Supreme

Court Justice Elena Kagan with seventh graders during their three-day exploration of the nation's capital. A centerpiece of Schechter's educational philosophy is to host leading experts, eyewitnesses and role models throughout the year so that students may learn from those with primary experiences in a particular field.

The objective, which is shared with alumni invited to participate, is to help ignite students' curiosity, spark essential questions, open their minds to the many ways individuals can impact our world, and inspire students to think and act globally as they grow. We've discovered that engaging alumni in mission-aligned opportunities packs a powerful punch: As alumni return to Schechter to share their expertise and experiences, they become partners in the school's educational mission. Jeremy says he found his experience so rewarding that when he was asked to be the keynote speaker at the launch of Schechter's Endowment campaign, he jumped at the opportunity to advocate for the school he felt helped pave his path to success.

## IT'S STILL ABOUT THE LITTLE THINGS

**College packages.** Schechter sends care packages to college alumni every December; this small gesture keeps Schechter on their radar and lays the groundwork for a potential advocacy role. Care packages include a Schechter-branded item (SSDS pajama pants, T-shirt, wristband, coffee mug, environmentally friendly water bottle) along with a host of other goodies. There's always a small ask involved: Send us photo of with your Schechter SWAG (Stuff We All Get) and we'll post it. Simply, we keep up the contact as we continue to nurture a positive association with Schechter.

**Birthday emails.** We send emails to alumni wishing them a happy birthday, just to remind them we are thinking of them.

**Hanukkah Across Schechter.** A new program designed to engage alumni in small groups. Alumni "hosts" are given a modest subsidy, a menorah and candles to host an intimate group of alumni friends on a night of Hanukkah. Schechter puts together a "party package" with branded goods and gives \$5 per alumnus to spend on food. All we ask in return is a photo. This has proven to be more effective than larger, more structured events, as alumni were able to get together on their own time and in a low-key setting. More than 30 alumni participated this year at five separate events—small numbers, but highly effective.

**Connected Parents = Connected Alumni.** In many cases, the school's biggest advocates are alumni whose parents remain involved with our school. When a parent continues to volunteer and/or donate to Schechter, that trickles down to their children. These relationships make our job easier, because parents invariably encourage their children to stay involved. Many times, parental involvement helps lead alumni to become Schechter parents, and hopefully, Schechter grandparents. Currently, there are 12 alumni with children at Schechter.

At Schechter, cultivating effective advocates has become a long-game strategy, one that demands a long-term plan and long-term goals, and doing things now that will set us up for the future.

## REMARKS: SSDS ENDOWMENT

### JEREMY FEIGENBAUM

I'd like to take you back to 2000 and 2001, when I was in sixth and seventh grade (it's been a while). SSDS was always great at incorporating simulation and experience into classes, and two examples stand out. In the first, with Ms. Gottlieb, we did the Trial of Socrates. I was Socrates, fighting for my life, and I remember as the class debated hard philosophical and legal questions—as important now as then. In the second, we tried Dred Scott for running away. I was the lawyer who got to defend Dred Scott, taking a stand against slavery. I thought it was the coolest thing I'd ever done, and I wanted to be in a profession where I could argue for oppressed men and women like Dred Scott. And those were just two examples of my earliest legal education; my SSDS education, Jewish and secular alike, was full of them.

That passion never went away. It took me to Brown to study political science and to Harvard Law School for three years after that. But where I was the most grateful for my SSDS education was when I had the opportunity to spend a year working for Justice Elena Kagan on the Supreme Court. I was one of the Justice's four law clerks, and we all grappled with some of the hardest legal and moral questions facing the country—from immigration to contraception and religion to protecting our environment. I got to see why being a lawyer was so important, and the way that law affects all of us, every day, in big ways we see and in small ways we don't. I'd like to think—in truth, I know—that my preparation for that job began long before I entered the Supreme Court building and long before I went to law school: It began when I learned about Dred Scott, about Socrates or about the debates that the rabbis had in the Talmud. It began here, in the building we're sitting in today.

And of course, SSDS shaped me Jewishly as well. I still regularly join my Schechter friends for Shabbos services and head over to friends' houses for Shabbos dinner right after. There is no way I would have had that sense of community, or that dedication to my faith and to all of our shared values (whether Shabbat or social justice) without SSDS. In fact, I now serve on the board of Mazon: A Jewish Response To Hunger with my rabbi, Joel Pitkowsky, something that never could have happened but for the values SSDS instilled in me and the path SSDS set me on.

But SSDS did not have those impacts on just my life. Nothing was more impactful for me when I clerked than getting to see how SSDS still instills that education and those values into successive generations. I saw that impact in the seventh-grade students who visited me in Washington, DC, to hear about the judicial branch. I walked them through a hall with portraits of the justices, sharing stories, and the students told me some things I hadn't known (especially about Justice Brandeis—they are clearly learning all about Jewish role models). They asked interesting, tough questions about how decisions get made; about the role of faith in judicial decision-making (as they no doubt are grappling with how their Jewish faith does and should affect their secular life, too); about the role of clerks; about Merrick Garland. I was stunned by their knowledge and curiosity. More than teaching them about government—important though that is—SSDS has taught these kids how to learn, how to be curious, how to ask tough questions, how to engage with the world around them. No matter what path these kids take after, those skills, and that thirst for knowledge, will shape them forever.

# COMMENTARY

## INSPIRING COMMITMENT

**Danielle Lustman,  
Director of Marketing and Communications,  
Brauser Maimonides Academy, Fort Lauderdale:**

Companies and organizations play into what their clients and customers want and need. The way consumers choose their brands has changed. Digitization has changed how people decide which brands they support. Their loyalty today is usually a result of which brand plays into their emotions. If the brand supports your parenting style, the car you chose, which foods you eat, likely you will support that brand because it relates to you as a person.

I believe brand loyalists are developed based on a personal and emotional connection customers have with how companies market themselves. A company that I think nailed this strategy is The Honest Company. They recognize that parents want safe products for their families, and through their advertising and marketing, they tap into their emotions. As a result, parents feel a connection to the company because they feel it understands them.

**Tali Benjamin,  
Director of Strategic Marketing and  
Planning,  
The Epstein School, Atlanta:**

In the Jewish educational space, what moves our consumers is the experience their family has at our schools. We are asking them to make an investment in their children's futures, and sometimes it is hard for them to see nine years down the road and how that investment will have been worth it. It's our job to help them feel that what we provide for their children is worth the cost of tuition today.

We have to remind them that we are excellent academic institutions, and that being members of our unique communities has a value that cannot be monetized. In the increasingly competitive educational landscape, where even public schools can be an attractive option for parents, we have to ensure that our value is clearly expressed. Only then can we expect a commitment from the changing parent population.

**Leigh Elzas, Director of Marketing and Public Relations,  
Netivot HaTorah, Toronto:**

The notion that it is about them, it is not about the brand, is often that aha, lightbulb moment many of us who work in marketing and PR come to appreciate when we see the fruits of our labor. When we launch a marketing campaign, we hope that it moves our audience and inspires our stakeholders to care about what it is we are selling. Understanding and even appreciating that what we are marketing—our ideas, our products, our services—is about our stakeholders and not about our brand is the defining element that will make or break our marketing efforts.

Seth Godin says it's about commitment—but what about it? When I think about commitment in relation to successful marketing, my mind automatically goes to content marketing, specifically social media marketing. Content Marketing + Social Media Marketing = Online Success (if done well)! The majority of our stakeholders use social media in some fashion, so reaching them this way and planting our ideas into their hearts and minds through a committed online presence is one of the most effective ways to change minds, create new ways and levels of thinking and sell, sell, sell!

To harness the true power of social media, we need to share useful, engaging content on a consistent basis, always keeping in mind the big question: What will move them?

Tracy: How can companies get marketing right?

Godin: Start by understanding that no one cares about them. People care about themselves. Anyone who tweets about a brand or favorites a brand is doing it because it is a symbol of who they are—it is a token, it is a badge. It's about them, it's not about the brand.

It costs something to give companies attention, and people are not going to give their attention just because a company bought a full-page ad in the newspaper.

Commitment is what is required to change minds. We change our minds because we have made a commitment, because something moves us.

**Abigail Tracy, "Seth Godin on  
What Marketers are Getting  
Wrong," Inc.**

**Deb McClellan,  
Director of Communications and  
Outreach, Gideon Hausner Jewish Day  
School, Palo Alto:**

By a large margin, families say they choose Hausner for community. Word of mouth is what brings them to our doors. Their desire is for their children, and their family, to be a part of our community rooted in Jewish tradition. Hausner creates community by

emphasizing the mitzvot of service: visiting the sick, feeding the hungry, giving of time and money. We teach students how to give responsibly, effectively and with a focus on Jewish values. This program has formed many of our students into budding philanthropists, with several going on to start up nonprofit organizations that serve the needy.

When a small group of parents gathered in a living room in the late 1980s to create a school, they wanted to create a place where their children would have a strong academic program in a warm and supportive setting. Did we get the marketing right, or did we simply serve our children and community?

# Increase Retention from Early Childhood Education to Kindergarten Through an Interactive Open House

For many Jewish day schools, retention from excellent early childhood education programs into day school kindergarten classes is a central focus of the admissions office. Retaining students in high-quality infant, toddler and preschool programs, when parents have no choice but to pay for care, can sometimes seem effortless. However, the tables often turn when a plethora of free public and other competitive independent school options becomes available at kindergarten. Even the most dedicated families begin to weigh their options financially and logistically when considering the entire Jewish day school journey for every child in their family. It is at this juncture that the stakes get really high.

We all know that the conversation about the value-added from a Jewish day school education needs to begin the minute families walk in the school door. Potential families, no matter how young their children are, need to see a warm and nurturing community and thriving classrooms where academics are top-notch and students' connection to Judaism and the Hebrew language are strong and palpable. A well-done tour of a Jewish day school has potential parents picturing their children, in various stages into the future, as part of that school's community. Once families are enrolled and happily settled into a school, this envisioning needs to continue, and it is the responsibility of the admissions office to nurture it through various retention efforts and events.

One small adjustment that can have a transformational impact upon parents of rising kindergarten students is an interactive open house, which was an idea presented to our admissions team at Independent School Management's Advancement Academy. This approach can replace the standard, less-effective model where families learn about a kindergarten program from staff, then passively visit a current classroom to see what is going on in the grade above and assess if it is right for their child. The interactive open house enables parents to actually see their children engaging in the environment they are considering, giving them a real picture of what it will look like. Additionally, the excitement that students feel from their experience of spending time as a "real kindergartener" can be contagious, affecting conversations at home and leading to children positively influencing enrollment decisions.

A secondary benefit that comes from an interactive open house as a retention event is that the perception of low enrollment in certain classes can be managed. Many schools have certain grades that are smaller than others simply because of demographic and environmental factors; it is crucial to make sure that the public does not perceive those small classes as the norm. The negative implications on a school's image when people believe a certain grade, especially kindergarten, is "always low" can be hard to mitigate. Therefore, when considering an interactive open house, one immense benefit is mixing prospective kindergarteners with current kindergarteners to create a robust cohort of students in the classroom. Additionally, the current kindergarteners can serve as the leaders in the lesson or activity the

kindergarten teacher plans, giving the observing parents another opportunity to witness the leadership, confidence and poise developed in a Jewish day school education.

After the kindergarten experience, it can be powerful to culminate an interactive open with a visit to the last grade of your Jewish day school, whether it is fifth, sixth, eighth or twelfth. In this part of the program, parents witness the end result of the day school experience and hear anecdotal stories about value gained from a rich day school education, straight from the mouths of the most senior students at your school. In front of parents stand the confident and smart mensches that were created from and fostered by your day school's dynamic program. This can be a very compelling moment in which parents decide that what they see is exactly what they want for their children, now and in the future.

As with all day school programming, the execution of this type of dynamic retention event requires a great deal of coordination and planning by the admissions team, administrators and staff. The early childhood education teachers who are responsible for the rising kindergarteners' day-to-day activities have to devote time to executing smooth visits for their students into the kindergarten classroom. They also become tasked with preparing their students way in advance for their "special day as a kindergartener," discussing what will happen and what will be expected, as well as cultivating their excitement for their day as a "big kid."

Current kindergarten teachers also have to plan for their typical routine to be disrupted for this type of event, and they have the important task of carefully selecting and planning a lesson that will impress the potential kindergarten parents, one that is infused with strong academics, a clear connection to Judaism, and a whole-child, loving approach. Teachers in the final grade of the school also have the responsibility of planning highly engaging lessons and preparing their students to serve as ambassadors for the school. Additionally, the admissions and administrative staff coordinate all the moving parts of the actual event, including inviting parents, timing and staffing the event, reserving physical spaces, creating a strategic agenda, and making sure that every school professional involved clearly understands his or her role as well as the overall purpose and importance of the event.

Once all of this is accomplished and the interactive open house takes place, schools are likely to see retention data that reflects the success of this type of programming. Our school in particular saw a 5% increase in Pre-K to K retention in the first year that we redesigned our "Taste of Kindergarten" event. We believe that this revised model, which left parents and students excited to take the leap from a thriving early childhood program into the rich day school kindergarten experience, will pave the way for increased day school enrollment in years to come.

# DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE BOARD ADVOCATES

**QUESTION:** HOW DO YOU PREPARE YOUR BOARD MEMBERS TO SERVE AS EFFECTIVE ADVOCATES OF YOUR SCHOOL?

## TERRI ROSEN

President, Board of Directors  
Ohr Chadash Academy  
Baltimore

At Ohr Chadash, we value the contributions of our school ambassadors. We recognize the importance of keeping our board members informed about what is happening in the school. We want our board members to feel confident when they speak to other members of the community and promote the school.

At the beginning of each year, the governance committee plans an orientation for all new board members, where a few veteran members provide an overview of the organization. New members learn of our vision and brand and discuss the process of how we chose our vision, the role of board members and our expectations, the committees, the budget, as well as the educational program and administrative staff overview. We also update them on any current or recent discussions that the board is having, so they are up to date for the first meeting. Additionally, they receive a printed packet or email containing a list of board member contact information, committees, by-laws and meeting schedule.

Last summer, I also took the initiative to meet one-on-one with each board member so I could learn more about what they want out of this experience and what they can contribute to the school board. While this process helped me learn how best to engage the board members, it also gave them a sense of empowerment to serve as ambassadors, knowing that their thoughts and contributions are taken seriously.

Our board meets about five times from September to June, and each meeting has time devoted to a school report from the principal and pertinent discussions from

the committee chairs. This allows the board members to have the information they need if anyone asks them questions about the school and gives them confidence to initiate a conversation about the school. At one board meeting, we took the board on a “field trip” to the art room, and the art teacher gave a passionate presentation about the art curriculum. Board members were so impressed and left feeling proud to serve on the board of Ohr Chadash.

## BRUCE GERSH

President, Board of Directors  
de Toledo High School  
West Hills, California

Our board members are on campus almost every day collaborating with the staff and students. Since opening our doors in 2002, our board has been invested in the mission and culture of our school. We are involved and love to participate. From Open House to Homecoming and the all-school Shabbaton, we are engaged and inspired.

Our board is consistently partnering with teachers, professionals, parents and the community. This partnership was front and center as we searched and selected our new head of school. The process required our board to articulate our school's mission, values and culture.

Also, our board connects with students to learn about the impact our school has on their high school experience. Every board meeting starts with a dvar Torah. Last year, I proposed that a student deliver this dvar Torah, and the response has been remarkable. This kodesh moment allows the board an opportunity to witness the powerful ways that the school shapes the life of a student. I cannot think of a more effective way to inspire our board.

## ABBY SCHEER

Board President  
Syracuse Hebrew Day School  
Syracuse, New York  
(with input from Melissa Fellman, Past President, and Lori Tenenbaum, Head of School)

I think providing board members with plenty of opportunities to learn about the school—its activities and successes as well as areas for further development—enables them to speak positively and confidently about the school within the community. Our head of school shares highlights about the school in her reports at each board meeting, and, in past years, individual staff members were invited to meetings to present on curricular areas and activities. The school's weekly newsletter is emailed to all board members; this publication is packed with information, photos and videos showcasing student activities and accomplishments both in and out of the classroom, as well as special initiatives and events. In addition, board members are invited to programs such as weekly assemblies, schoolwide Shabbat and the school play.

This year, our board embarked on a “listening tour” with current families and other stakeholders. This allowed several of our board members to hear firsthand what our constituents think is working well and what areas can be improved. The results of these conversations provided valuable information, which was shared with the board at our retreat and in a larger meeting with parents, teachers and other community members. This information, as well as a set of talking points, was shared with board members to help them provide consistent messages and speak with one voice when communicating about the school within the community.

# YOUR SCHOOL BELONGS HERE

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# PRIZMAH

Center for Jewish Day Schools



GLENN SLAVIN

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# Creating the Online Infrastructure for Successful Digital Word of Mouth

ACCORDING TO A NIELSEN GLOBAL TRUST IN ADVERTISING REPORT, 92% OF CONSUMERS TRUST RECOMMENDATIONS FROM FRIENDS AND FAMILY ABOVE ALL OTHER FORMS OF ADVERTISING. IF WORD-OF-MOUTH ADVERTISING IS THE UNPAID SPREAD OF A POSITIVE MARKETING MESSAGE FROM PERSON TO PERSON, SOCIAL MEDIA IS THE MODERN DAY, TECHNOLOGICAL EQUIVALENT. ARE YOU MORE LIKELY TO GO TO A NEW RESTAURANT BECAUSE THE RESTAURANT CLAIMS IT IS WORTH IT OR BECAUSE A TRUSTED FRIEND SAYS SHE HAD A GREAT EXPERIENCE? WHEN OUR CONSTITUENTS SHARE POSITIVE OPINIONS, NEWS AND EXPERIENCES ON SOCIAL NETWORKS, IT INCREASES OUR CREDIBILITY AMONG PROSPECTIVE FAMILIES IN A WAY WE AS THE INSTITUTION CANNOT. TO THIS END, GOLDA OCH ACADEMY HAS ESTABLISHED A DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE TO MAKE IT EASY FOR OUR CONSTITUENTS TO SHARE THEIR TESTIMONIALS AND EXPERIENCES SO THEY BECOME AN INTEGRAL PART OF A PROSPECTIVE FAMILY'S DECISION.

## WEBSITE

Our website is our hub. We like to direct prospective families to our website because right on the homepage, in addition to learning about the school via videos, calendar of events and our Facebook feed, someone can view and register for an open house and other admissions events, complete and submit an inquiry form, schedule a private tour, contact our admissions directors, and also apply. Our website is our digital front door. To get people to our website, we have worked across digital platforms, including our social-media channels, school ranking websites, community websites and news outlets, to integrate a message highlighting our mission, vision, core values and value proposition.

The website should manifest the brand strategy in its architecture, writing, design and photography, conveying a sense of professionalism and polish. In addition, the use of analytics should be determinative to measuring your social-media success. If your strategy is working, you should see an increase in traffic and leads to your website from your social networks.

## SOCIAL-MEDIA CHANNELS

The testimony of a parent, alumni parent, student or alumni is one of the most powerful tools we can use to market a Jewish day school education.

It's important to continually track your social-media marketing metrics in order to gauge which tactics and types of posts work and which don't. Some social platforms offer their

own metrics. Facebook, for instance, gives page administrators access to page insights data for free. These tell you how many people are interacting with your posts. You can use the data to better plan future posts and decide on the most effective ways to connect with your fans and followers.

It is important to remember that social-media audiences can be fickle and difficult to please. People generally don't appreciate hard sales pitches, and they like to be engaged but not oversaturated with content. It's a fine line to walk, and finding the right balance is essential to success. Social media is built around engagement, requiring continuous input from your social marketing manager or team. Part of your success includes analyzing what works, what doesn't and making changes. What you do today might not work next month, so it is important to stay flexible.

We currently maintain social-media accounts and profiles on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn and Flickr, with an active focus on Facebook, which is versatile and very effective for telling a story in a compelling manner. We are active in boosting posts to predetermined, carefully culled audiences. Through much trial and error, we have concluded that a single, eye-catching photo or strong video gets better organic results than text-heavy posts, and touting the services we provide to the community gets more reach than other posts.

Our parent ambassadors are asked to share testimonials that clearly demonstrate their or their child's experience that highlight one of our school's core values (Love of Learning; Community; Respect; Love of Israel; Tikkun Olam; and Jewish Life and Learning) or value propositions (nurturing environment, outstanding faculty, opportunities for students to pursue their passion, meaningful relationships, Israel trips, state-of-the-art facilities, college opportunities, etc.). We also ask people to write a review of our school directly on our Facebook page. Value is often overlooked when it comes to marketing. Regardless of how many people you reach, nobody will make a purchase if they don't see the value in the product or service.

In addition, we routinely ask our engaged community to like and comment on our posts, share our posts and tag people. (Once a Facebook user is tagged, all of their friends can see the post.) These actions are the best way to build awareness of your brand. In a competitive market, how you differentiate is hugely important. Building awareness will help expand your prospective base. Your school develops its "reach" by developing a viral momentum of "likes." Social media operates along a one-to-many trajectory, where a single user's content has the opportunity to reach many. Once you have one fan, you have all their fans. You never know who might end up seeing your social-media postings. According to the research firm eMarketer, brands view social sharing as the most effective use of social media: 68% of US social-media users ages 18-34 and 53% of those ages 35-54 say they are at least somewhat likely to make a purchase based on a friend's social media updates.

## SEARCH ENGINES

Google Analytics allows you to see how effective your social-media campaigns are at driving traffic to your main website. If you see your active social platforms listed as top referrers to your site, your social-media efforts are working.

You can create Google Adwords campaigns to keep your school atop prospective families' search results. And although Google keeps its algorithm a closely guarded secret, Google includes a "Reviews from the Web" section in its search results box. This could pull from one of your social-media sites, such as Facebook, or from an independent ranking website, and could be one of the first "reviews" a prospective parent sees of your school.

## SCHOOL RANKING WEBSITES

More and more people are turning to sites such as Niche, Private School Review and GreatSchools for quick and easy-to-find information when researching day schools. Since Google often pulls the school's rating onto its search results box, it is essential for day school marketing and admissions professionals to be proactive in maintaining good scores and having good, honest reviews written.

Your school is most likely already listed on one or more of these sites. Many give you the option to upgrade to a premium version that allows you to include photos, videos and other information. Still, the most important part of these sites are the third-party, word-of-mouth testimonials. It is imperative to encourage anyone from your community willing to write a review to do so.

## COMMUNITY WEBSITES

There are undoubtedly multiple local websites in your community where you can post events happening at your school, get articles and press releases posted, and place advertising. One avenue these sites often offer is sponsored content. This is a great way to get the word out about your school.

We asked a parent with professional writing experience to come up with a sponsored content story titled "Top 5 Reasons to Choose Golda Och Academy." Though the article was clearly labeled "sponsored content," the byline emphasized that the story was written by a "current school parent," which lent weight and import to what was in essence a word-of-mouth testimonial of this parent's own experience. The story featured a link directly to our website in addition to the email address of our admissions director. Once posted, we were able to share the article on all of our social media channels.

## NEWS OUTLETS

Be active in public relations. Send press releases about all the positive developments happening in your school as broadly as possible. Invite local reporters to your school events and pitch them story ideas. Share the articles and news items on social media, and encourage your followers to do the same.

When Jewish day school constituents share positive opinions, news and experiences on digital platforms, it increases our credibility among prospective families in a way the school cannot. Online word of mouth creates impressions that lead to awareness. The more people that become aware of our school, the more people are likely to inquire directly about our education, and that is the ultimate goal of any marketing and admissions department.

# Who Does Your School Think It Is?

A conversation between two creatives about day school marketing and branding.



Andrea Naddaff is someone you might call a real marketing and branding guru. For over 20 years, Andrea and her team have been enlisted by some of New England's most prominent universities, private schools and museums to develop their branding, websites and communications strategies.

On a spring day in April, Prizmah's creative director, Donna Von Samek, sat down with her to talk about two of their favorite topics: marketing and schools.

**Donna Von Samek:** Andrea, you've worked with quite the roster of independent day schools, universities, start-ups, charities, museums and much more. What is the one thing that always surprises you when you embark on a new project?

**Andrea Naddaff:** I think what surprises me is how much it doesn't really matter what industry a client is in, or what their business model is, or if they are a B2B, B2C, B2B2C. (Editor's note: These are different models of marketing: business-to-business, business-to-consumer, business-to-business-to-consumer.) They all need to do the same thing: figure out what makes them different and unique, package it in such a way that is authentic and compelling, and tell their story to their audiences so their audiences step up and take notice.

**DVS:** It's so true. I can't help but always come back to this mantra I once read: "It's

not about saying something louder, it's about saying something different." But even that can feel daunting at times. I know that when Prizmah first opened its doors in July 2016, there was this sense of "OK, where to begin?" when it came to building our brand. In your opinion, where does a school or an institution begin?

**AN:** It always begins with defining the strategic part of your brand and figuring out the five Ps: position (the benefit that sets your brand apart), promise (the pledge to your customers about the experience), permission (the scope of the brand, the dos and don'ts), personality (your brand voice and attitude) and permanence (enduring qualities of your brand).

**DVS:** As a client of yours, I have to say that part of your genius is in the questions that you ask clients during kickoff meetings. Your questions force them to be disciplined and drill down to the root of why a company/organization/institution needs to exist. What have you found to be the most evocative question to ask?

**AN:** I have two:

- How would the world be different if your organization didn't exist?
- Share with me something about this organization that someone on the outside wouldn't know.





# Success Stories in Jewish Day Schools

## PHILIPPA LICHTERMAN

Admissions Director,  
Oakland Hebrew Day School

# Ambassadorship: A Powerful Recruitment Tool

Think about the last time you purchased something online or at the store. What convinced you to buy the product? Was it the result of great reviews you read? A recommendation from a friend or acquaintance? Perhaps you had used it before and found it to be a positive benefit in your life? Our experience as a day school has shown that the single best indicator of whether a prospective parent chooses our school is whether they received a positive review from another parent. When we share our passion and excitement about a school with other parents, provide accurate information and connect them to the right resources, we have the power to increase enrollment and reduce attrition.

Nearly two years ago, our school embarked on Prizmah's recruitment program, Atidenu. We reached out to numerous parents, board members, faculty and community members to evaluate our value proposition and explore areas for market growth. We also worked with expert coaches in the areas of marketing, branding and ambassadorship.

We selected specific parent ambassadors to engage in an ambassadorship training program led by Prizmah. Ambassadors selected were positive advocates for the school and active members in one of our targeted market segments who were willing to take on this responsibility. The board of directors also participated in this training program. The goal was to help our ambassador teams understand the school's value proposition and ways to utilize this information to engage in active outreach and retention efforts. After the in-person training session was complete, every ambassador was asked to come in for a tour of the school to ensure they had updated information and to answer any questions. Ambassadors were given an ambassadorship handbook, which provided information about the school.

In addition, ambassadors were assigned specific ambassador roles, such as attending outreach events, monitoring social media sites, following up with prospective parents after a tour, or helping with community relations. The admissions director communicated with the ambassador teams via video conference or email to monitor the successes and challenges, and ensure they had the tools necessary to be strong ambassadors for the school. Ambassadors were encouraged to spread positive word of mouth to their friends and acquaintances in the community and invite them for a tour of the school.

As a result of the ambassadorship program, our school received inquiries for kindergarten and bridge kindergarten much earlier in the admissions season, allowing more time to build meaningful

relationships with prospective families. This led to increased enrollment in our bridge kindergarten program. Honing in on our value proposition also helped our ambassador teams to use shared language, allowing for consistent messaging about our school. Thanks to our ambassadors' efforts in the community, we have also begun to connect more intentionally with community organizations to help in recruitment and retention.

As we look to our future, we aim to continue improving the ways we support and rally our ambassador teams. We also plan to implement a student ambassadorship program.



# Success Stories in Jewish Day Schools

## JANICE PRAZOFF

Director of Admission,  
The Leo Baeck Day School, Toronto

## Dirty Words

Using terms such as “customer service” and “business-mindedness” in a school is sure to get a reaction. But those words reflect a changed reality in school admissions and everyone needs to shift their thinking.

Today’s customers (parents) are savvy and know a lot about us even before they walk through our doors. The millennial consumer conducts in-depth online research, relies on peer reviews, and is looking for evidence to back up marketing claims. So when we have the opportunity to engage with these families, there is no doubt our focus is on customer service. From their first inquiry to the school, via our website or a phone call, to a visit in our building, we must consider their impression of who we are. Every staff member contributes to the consumer experience. We pride ourselves on warm greetings from office staff and security, handshakes and a welcome from passing teachers in the hallway, enthusiastic students sharing their learning in classes. Over the past three years, our admission department has transformed the way we do business, with a clear emphasis on building relationships.

First, we think about cultivating relationships over time. We look for opportunities to engage with our community and to provide families with the chance to participate in what our school has to offer without the weight of a transaction. We see this as a taste test. The goal should be to create programming that allows young families to come into your school, see your teachers in action, and begin to understand your values and approach to teaching and learning.

These events provide the perfect backdrop to highlight current students by having them serve as student ambassadors. Student ambassadors greet families and escort them through the school to the event location. We take the time to coach our students on how to talk to guests: how to introduce themselves, what kinds of questions they might ask visitors, and a handoff line such as, “We’re so glad you joined us this morning and hope you enjoy the program our teachers have



created for you.” There isn’t a prospective family who attends who won’t notice the confidence and presence of these ambassadors. It provides a clear picture of who their child might be if they choose your school.

The creation of formal parent ambassador teams is also a key ingredient to developing relationships and delivering quality service. Parent ambassadors at events can be used strategically to participate in the programs with their young children. Participants receive a tag that reads “Current Parent,” and once again, we work with these identified ambassadors on how to approach prospective families, what questions to ask and key pieces of information about our school to share. The goal is to create authentic interactions that focus on ambassador

families’ true experience and love for the school.

Use the data to your advantage. Data collection before and after events provides valuable information about prospective families and allows for targeted marketing. Post-event follow-up focuses on personalized, service-minded delivery of how our school can be the answer to a given family’s needs and desires for its child(ren). We carefully track each prospective family’s connection to our school and craft an intentional plan to encourage further and deeper engagement through the formal admission process.

It may not be an easy journey to shift a school’s focus to prioritize service-mindedness; schools traditionally aren’t seen as places of business. But the proof is in the pudding. Relationships, cultivated over time and steeped in a sincere desire to understand your customer, offer an amazing opportunity to present your unique value proposition and will ultimately lead to greater enrollment. At our school, the implementation of these techniques raised entry-level applications by 25% in one year. There’s no doubt you will see your school’s retention increase as well. Despite what your Bubby has taught you, don’t be afraid to use these dirty words in your school’s admission approach.

## RABBI ELISHA PAUL

Head of School,  
The Jewish High School of Connecticut,  
Stamford

# Open Houses for Fuller Enrollment

Periodically, school professionals, myself included, have questioned the usefulness of having open houses for prospective student families as part of a recruitment program. Their effectiveness is unpredictable, and the amount of effort that goes into planning an open house may not be worth the time and money involved.

Wise people often ask wiser people for their opinions and experiential wisdom. After getting consensus from my teaching staff that our open house format needed improvement, I reached out to two of the deans of the communal school world for their advice. Both of them helped immensely by confirming that open houses are valuable when done right, and by sharing some of their personal open-house best practices.

Bruce Powell from de Toledo High School in Los Angeles confirmed what I have long believed: If the first time a prospective family meets a staff member from your school is when they walk into a model lesson at an open house, that will often be the last time you see them. The prospective parents and students are often too nervous and anxious to get comfortable with you, your school or your staff by the time the initial interaction concludes.

Of course, knowing someone prior to the open house helps alleviate this unease. But what can schools do to reduce the stress level of new prospective families who visit the school for the first time? The standard administrator greeting them at the door and having a student or parent docent guide the guest is necessary but not always sufficient to lower the anxiety level of a visitor. Powell's idea of having a "learning shuk" offered a powerful means to increase the comfort level of prospective families. This idea helps solve the problem of some early arrivals being

bored or some late arrivals missing out on key presentations.

In addition to the standard nosh and/or music for the first half-hour of an open house, have teachers from each academic discipline stand behind tables talking about their subject areas with potential parents who mill around the room or seek them out. Each teacher presents artifacts from their classroom, utilizes props and even invites student assistants to help explain what they're learning in class. The opportunity to make informal initial introductions to teachers makes the more formal model lessons that follow a more comfortable experience for both the teachers and the guests.

Zipora Schorr from Beth Tfiloh Dahan in Baltimore helped us spot an obvious flaw in our open house model that was easily corrected

once we were aware of it. In order to maximize staff availability, we had always run model lessons for combined groups of parents and students at the same time. Schools would never run classes for groups with an age disparity of 20 or 30 years between students, yet that is exactly what we had done at open houses. Aside from cognitive and generational differences, having students and their parents together in the classroom led to social awkwardness. The simple change of running separate sessions for adults and for students improved our model class presentations immensely.

As a result of these changes, our numbers of follow-ups, shadow visits, tours, applications and ultimately enrolled students increased. As someone once told me, "Setting up the physical environment properly is one of the most important factors contributing to success."



## Success Stories in Jewish Day Schools





## AMY SCHLUSSEL

Director of Advancement,  
Hillel Day School of Metropolitan Detroit

# Like Night and Day: Changing Our Open Houses

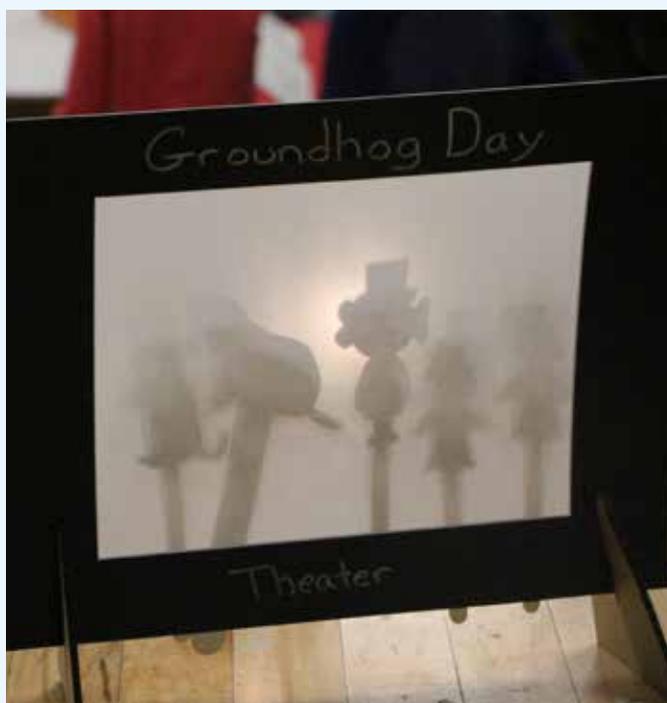
The definition of insanity is doing the same thing repeatedly and expecting a different result each time. This is exactly what we were doing with respect to holding open houses for prospective parents. We put an evening date on the calendar and prayed that people would attend after their work day. Until a few years ago, a good number of them did.

We have found, however, that the amount of time and energy spent planning, marketing and cajoling people to attend just does not seem to provide an adequate return on investment, especially when you spend most of the time during the open house itself urging parents to return a second time, during a school day, to see the school “in action.”

Thank goodness, we turned off the open house autopilot button, and experienced an aha moment. Rejecting monotonous open houses, we innovated to meet the needs of today’s prospective families.

We created three new models to excite families to apply to our school. We now offer a daytime open house, where families meet our leadership team and current teachers and students to hear about our school and its philosophy. The most important aspect of the open house is that our parent ambassadors, who have undergone extensive training, lead visitors on a tour of the school, so they can see learning in real time. On these tours, prospective parents witness the true collaborative nature of our learning, and the relationships between students and teachers. We no longer have to invite parents to return to school after an open house.

We continue to host an evening open house every year, but we now really think “outside the box” to plan evenings geared toward the entire family. We provide dinner, and creative, theme-based activities. Recent open houses have revolved around the opening of a new Star Wars movie, Groundhog Day and the ever-popular emojis! The themes are conducive to showcasing the progressive curriculum and innovative spaces our school offers. For example, attendees created brush bots and light sabers in our MakerSpace, and partook in “Yoda Yoga” during the Star Wars open house after enjoying Han(Solo) burgers for dinner. Our Groundhog Day open house showcased shadow theaters created in the MakerSpace, together with math prediction depiction and flashlight games. This year, families planted emoji bowls in our greenhouse, and used Blabberize in our Innovation Hub after creating their own emoji cookies for dessert.



Our parent ambassadors play a key role in our recruitment process, as neighborhood promoters who host parlor meetings in three to four key demographic areas. These informal evenings with current parents, leadership and alumni (and wine and snacks—very important) offer attendees the opportunity to hear about our school, its philosophy and why families love it, in a non-threatening atmosphere. These intimate get-togethers encourage great conversations about our school and education in general. We do not get discouraged if only a few people attend because we realize that those people tell others about the evening, and great buzz is created about our school.

All of these methods require time, creativity, effort and coordination on the part of our staff. But as our enrollment has grown over the last three years, we have found it to be a great and worthwhile investment.

# Success Stories in Jewish Day Schools

## JENNIFER GRUBBS PhD

Directory of Admissions & Outreach,  
Rockwern Academy, Cincinnati

## Rebuilding Enrollment

Our school plays a unique role in our Jewish community. As the only pluralist day school within a 100-mile radius, the school serves a diverse population of families. In order to ensure Rockwern is inclusive and appealing to a wide demographic, the marketing and outreach efforts must both be *specific* and *adaptive*. Seven years ago, Rockwern leadership partnered with The Jewish Foundation and the Jewish Federation of Cincinnati to reinvigorate the student enrollment through a Tuition Affordability Initiative. The partnership allowed the school to hire a head of school with extensive day school experience, as well as two marketing professionals. The marketing approach was two-pronged: professionalize internal and external communication, with an emphasis on the Tuition Affordability Initiative; and foster a strong sense of community, as a vehicle to improve retention, beginning in the school's Early Childhood Education Center.

In 2013, the newly hired marketing professionals placed an emphasis on creating the message track: *Rockwern is religiously and economically inclusive*. The external marketing featured images that reflect the Jewish diversity at the school, as well as the balance of secular and Judaic studies. Retention events engaged parents across an economic spectrum through the planning, implementation and budgeting process. The team approached recruitment and retention symbiotically, conceptualizing the audience of each touchpoint as interconnected. Each advertisement, email and classroom blog were given the same level of attention and detail. The school calendar became a foundation for the team to address inclusivity of both dual-working and single households. The collaborative endeavor ensured that pluralism and affordability were consistently communicated to community members.

The Tuition Affordability Initiative provided non-need tuition grants that fell into three categories: Grade Grants (Kindergarten-Grade 3), Jewish Communal Professional Grants

(JCP), and Multi-Child Grants. The Grade Grants allowed the marketing professional to focus on grades that had historically struggled with retention and also allowed the team to recruit new students with the financial incentive. The JCP Grant, available to students beginning in the Toddler Program, provided an important way to bring in the city's engaged, committed Jewish leaders, and their families, to Rockwern. The Multi-Child Grant, available to families with at least one child in kindergarten and above, created a form of tuition support that supported our growing families.

In addition to the grants, financial aid, awarded through a confidential review using FAST, provided another tier of support to ensure tuition was not a deterrent. The school provides opportunities throughout the year for its community partners, including the Jewish Foundation and the Jewish Federation, and donors to attend tailored programming and engage with school professionals and board members. The relationship with these partners and donors has allowed the Rockwern community to grow in meaningful ways.

In 2012, the school's enrollment had reached a low of 144 students; five years later, it had grown to 245. The growth is attributed to many positive advances at the school, but the innovative communication and marketing approach was particularly successful. With a concentrated effort on increasing the school's presence in the larger Jewish community and promoting the ways in which the school supports a diverse population, both Jewishly and economically, Rockwern has been able to rebuild enrollment from the bottom up. The Early Childhood Education Center continues to be a strong pipeline for the school, and many of the preschool classes are on a waiting list by the January enrollment deadline. The communication and marketing strategies remain focused on the unique, special community at Rockwern, and the outstanding secular and pluralist Judaic studies offered.



## JULIE FORTUNE

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Director of Admissions and Outreach,  
Akiva School, Nashville

# Embracing Local Culture

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I grew up in Tennessee (aka “the buckle of the Bible Belt”) and have spent my entire life in the Deep South (Tennessee, Mississippi, Florida and Alabama). If you are not from the South, let me assure you the culture here is rich, vibrant and joyful. And yes, many of the stereotypes you have about Southerners are true. In the summer, we sit on our front porch laughing with friends and drinking sweet tea. Most of our vegetables are served fried, and the mere mention of “potential snow flurries” causes schools to close across the state.

There is something unique about being both Jewish and Southern that only Southern Jews truly understand. And even though it may not seem like both cultures complement each other, I believe they do on a deep level. In the South, you are expected to be polite and kind to everyone. You are raised to respect your elders, to say “Yes, ma’am” and “No, sir.” There is an implicit trust of your community, so your children are able to ride their bikes around the neighborhood and play until the fireflies come out. Your neighborhood has block parties and cookouts and everyone is welcome and expected to bring a “plus one.” These values of community, family and inclusion we own in the South are the same values we know are deep within Judaism.

When families relocate from larger non-Southern Jewish communities to Nashville, they are shocked by the hospitality, kindness and grand welcome they receive. They do not expect to get handwritten thank-you cards from our head of school thanking them for a visit or an offer to video-chat with their

child’s future classmates. They are surprised that we are so willing to connect them with realtors, preschool directors and clergy from every denomination.

To us, these small steps that we take to make new and potential families feel included and welcome aren’t anything special. This is who we are as a Jewish community. Our Tennessee culture tells us to be courteous, but our Jewish identity demands that we go deeper. Our heritage commands that our welcoming of the stranger, our food for the needy and our smiles to the homeless are authentic.

Embracing our heritage—both Southern and Jewish—has empowered our school to be who we are: a community Jewish day school for Southern Jews. Although we have families from all over the world, including Russia, Israel and Persia, our Southern community and Jewish values provide a foundation for our children grounded in compassion, love of the other and inclusion. While many Jewish families are anxious about moving to the South, when they get here they see that our Southern culture only serves to complement our Jewish values.

By truly accepting who we are as a school, we have been able to flourish, grow and connect with our students and their families on meaningful levels. I challenge you to ask yourself, For what is your community known? How can you use that to your advantage? And most importantly, what other foods can we fry?



BARRY KISLOWICZ

# When in Rome, Create a Community

OVER THE COURSE OF THIS YEAR, I HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO VISIT ROME AND TO WORK WITH LEADERS OF ITS COMMUNITY DAY SCHOOL. MY INTENDED PURPOSE THERE WAS TO ASSIST THEM WITH A NEW STRATEGIC PLANNING EFFORT, BUT WHAT I SAW ACTUALLY SHED NEW LIGHT ON THE MORE FAMILIAR CHALLENGES FACED BY NORTH AMERICAN DAY SCHOOLS.

My encounter began, like most, with a school tour. Located in the heart of the Roman ghetto, the school is housed in a 100-year-old historic building, renovated approximately 20 years ago to include all the technological accoutrements of a modern facility. The hallways are dotted by student work and flyers for upcoming youth and community events, and the building buzzes with the sort of vibrancy one hopes to see in a thriving school. Security, of course, is much tighter than what we might be used to, with police and the community's security guards guarding the entrance and guests being required to submit official ID 24 hours in advance of a scheduled visit.

I began my conversation with the school director, Rabbi Benedetto Carucci, as I do with many heads of school whom I encounter in my work: "Tell me, how is your relationship with your board?"

He looked at me strangely. I thought that perhaps something had been lost in translation. His English was slightly stronger than my Italian, and we had been communicating in Hebrew during this initial discussion. After some creative hand gesturing and Google translating, however, it became clear that I had indeed understood his response. He was trying to explain to me that his school did not have a board of directors.

How then is the school governed?

In Rome, as in many European Jewish communities, there is a formal community board whose president and officers are elected by official community vote. This board governs all official community business. Rather than being a separate, independent entity, Rome's day school is fully owned by the community. Committees are established to manage the details of each area, but these committees bear only recommending power. The community board, therefore, is the governing body of the school just as it is the governing body for the Jewish cemetery or welfare organization. And the school principal is a community employee just as the cemetery manager is a community employee.

As I was trying to wrap my head around what this meant, I proceeded with the typical list of questions on enrollment, admissions and marketing. I was somewhat surprised to hear that this school of 500 students did not have even a part-time admissions, marketing or public relations professional, and I made a mental note to suggest they consider staffing additions in these areas.

To explain why such a professional was needed, I asked the principal what percentage of the community's children currently attended his lower school. After some caveats about wanting to increase enrollment, he shared that the school currently serves 75% of the community's children. Suffice it to say

that this was the end of my regular line of questioning.

Coming from a North American context, these numbers are downright shocking. Keep in mind that this is a community school, not an Orthodox day school. Best estimates from The Jewish People Policy Institute are that the percentage of Jewish children in US day schools range around 25 percent, and this percentage is skewed upwards by the very high percentage of enrollment in the Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox sectors.

As I reflected on this unusual school visit, I was struck by how the confluence of direct governance of the school by the community board, the lack of admissions or marketing personnel, and the high enrollment rates may come together to generate interesting insights for leaders concerned about student enrollment in North American schools.

I was quite curious about what led to the school's high enrollment rate. As I pressed the principal and others familiar with the school on the issue, they could not easily explain why so many parents chose to enroll their children. In their opinion, enrollment trends were not related to anti-Semitism in the public school system, academic quality or the added value of the Jewish day school. Rather, they suggested that for members of the Jewish community in Rome, this is

simply the natural choice. Parents' working assumption is that, barring special circumstances, they will send their children to a Jewish day school.

What decision-making process is at work here? Is this simply a case of people going with the flow rather than carefully weighing educational options for their children? Perhaps. But a more compelling explanation is that the process at play here is what psychologists term "identity-based decision making" (Dan and Chip Heath & Heath, *Switch*). This mode of decision-making is one of the most influential we encounter, and each of us makes key choices based on this paradigm. When we are engaged in identity-based decision making, we make the choice that fits with our self-conception.

For example, people who identify as Boy or Girl Scouts may be less likely to litter, not because they are weighing the cost/benefit of littering differently than the rest of us, but because littering is something that scouts simply do not do. It is this same sort of decision-making that is invoked when a coach tells his players to behave a certain way because that is what (*insert your favorite team name*) do. And it is this sort of decision making that makes Jewish parents in Rome more likely to enroll their children in the community day school.

Why they do so can be traced back to the particularities we highlighted earlier. First and foremost, the school is literally owned by the community. Community members take it as a fact of life that they will be buried in the community cemetery because that is where community members are buried. So too, they take it as a basic assumption that they will send their children to the community day school because that is what community members do.

Now consider the fact that the school does not have a professional admissions or marketing director. Of course, it may be that the school does not have such a position because it does not need one. But it may also be that the school does not need one because it does not have one.

Researchers have shown that we tend to make decisions either based on an emotionally driven response (such as identity-based decision making) or based on rational analysis. They have also proven that if we are primed to think in terms of emotional response, our decisions will proceed along those lines, while if we are primed to think in terms of rational analysis, we will proceed as such (Dan and Chip Heath, *Made to Stick*).

If it is true that Rome's parents are flocking to the school based on identity-based motivations, a marketing or admissions department that extols the school's academic excellence, strong extracurriculars or university admissions rates may be just enough to push parents out of their identity-based assumptions and into a mode of questioning whether the school is indeed the best choice for their child. Precisely because it does not employ an explicit marketing effort, the school supports parents' identity-based decision that if they are community members, then this is the right place for their children.

An analogous phenomenon can be seen across North American independent schools. Leading school heads note (and often bemoan) that a generation ago they could count on a family's allegiance to the school. If the eldest child was enrolled, in another example of identity-based decision making, the family would be a "\_\_\_\_ school family" and the rest of the children would follow. Today, it is the norm for families to choose a different school for each child based on their assessment of that child's needs. Whether this is a positive or negative development can be debated, but it is clearly the result of moving from an identity-based decision-making model to a mode of point-by-point analysis.

Rome is indeed very different from our local context. Yet I would argue that we can extrapolate important lessons from their story. As we work to increase enrollment in our schools, most of us tend to work only along the lines of the rational analysis approach. Our marketing and admissions departments advertise our schools' wonderful features, academic, Judaic and extracurricular, and communicate the benefits to students and their families in a nuanced and sophisticated manner.

Alongside these approaches, or in some cases in their place, we should consider consciously cultivating supporting parents' identity-based decisions to enroll their children. Admittedly, this will not be a quick fix. It is both more subtle and more complex.

Many of our schools are not organically situated within a community that supports enrollment decisions as does that of Rome. As a result, we must begin one step earlier. The most important, innovative step that our schools can take is to first build the community we seek. Most schools already aim to create a feeling of community among our parents, and to this end we support efforts such as parent associations. These are indeed important, but to be truly impactful we need to reach beyond them in terms of scope and depth.

Parent associations, by nature, are typically focused on our current parents. In these efforts, we must consider expanding them to a broader circle, to include all those who we hope may become school parents in the future. To be clear, I do not mean that we should hold an annual event for the following year's prospective parents. If we are to take this seriously, it means fostering an ongoing, year-round connection to those who may be many years away from enrolling children.

Some schools are fortunate to find themselves situated near a proximal community which they can use as a partner for their efforts. For example, many parents in a school may participate in a certain congregation, JCC or Jewish federation, or send their children to a certain summer camp. If that is the case, the school may be able to use these partners to help expand its reach beyond that of the typical parent association. If not, the school can make use of its current parents' social networks to include non-parents in its community-building efforts.

Non-parents may suspect the school is motivated by enrollment or fundraising goals. It will take time to convince them that we are fundamentally driven by the desire to build community. To do so, it is essential that we do not include fundraising or marketing materials in any of these programs. This is a classic case of doing well by doing good, and we must be clear that our primary intention is to do good.

In line with this principle is an imperative to add depth to our activities. Many parent associations are fundamentally activity or social programming groups, and some are veiled attempts at fundraising. Instead, we must attempt to create a deep sense of authentic community for the sake of community, not just through programs but also through appropriate services, connection-building and all-encompassing connection. Examples might include regular parent learning and cultural activities, Friday night dinners, volunteer days, or relocating synagogue services or other community programs to the school.

Is this a case of mission creep? Aren't schools supposed to worry about the children more than the parents?

Perhaps. But I would argue that it is both necessary and justified. Justified, purely in dollars and cents, because we understand the exponential return on investment of any effective enrollment strategy. Justified, fundamentally, because it is our responsibility to build the community of shared value and identity that will lead parents to choose our schools.

MANETTE MAYBERG

# Lessons from Mezuzah about Redefining Success in Day Schools





AS WE MERITED TO MAKE THE JOURNEY FROM SLAVERY TO FREEDOM, FROM THE CONSTRAINTS WITHIN EGYPT TO THE FREEDOM AND CHALLENGE OF EVOLVING INTO A NATION, IT IS INCUMBENT UPON US TO UTILIZE THIS JOURNEY'S MESSAGE TO ITS FULLEST. THE PASSOVER STORY INFORMS OUR WORK IN JEWISH EDUCATION. FROM OUR RAW BEGINNINGS AS A PEOPLE, WHAT LESSON CAN WE DRAW THAT CAN DIRECT US IN OUR MISSION TO PREPARE FUTURE GENERATIONS OF JEWS IN THE DEEPEST AND MOST MEANINGFUL WAY POSSIBLE?

There is a remarkable piece in God's method of preparing the Jews to leave Egypt. God commands every Jew to take a lamb into his home for four days, then slaughter it and mark the doorpost of the house with its blood, resulting in the Passover sacrifice. With thoughtful reading of this text, we can see how this act, which left the Jews who performed it exposed to the scrutiny of their Egyptians neighbors, required a deep trust in God. This explains the assertion in Midrash Rabbah that most of the Jews remained and assimilated, with only a minority following God's word and then leaving Egypt.

We recognize this marking of the doorpost as the first mezuzah. Before the law came down to mark each of our homes with the declaration of God's oneness, Jewish souls were challenged to have the courage to distinguish their homes. The specified mark is not subtle, but a bold, emphatic statement using an Egyptian deity, risking potentially

life-threatening retribution from their oppressors. God clearly had an eternal message in this, and it applies to us today. Demonstrating bold and fearless distinction—separating ourselves, our homes and our institutions—has enabled our survival throughout the ages. Beginning with a mark of blood on their doors, the Jews who exited Egypt created a unique nation of people capable of sustainability against all odds. Distinction has been the eternal glue of the Jewish people, even as we were scattered to all four corners of the earth. God said to “mark your houses” because what you hold inside, the values that infuse your families, is the gift that will distinguish you for all time and ensure your survival.

Jewish educators are partners with the holiest institution since the Holy Temple: the Jewish home. Many Jews, perhaps the vast majority, have no idea that the home is, in fact, holier even than the synagogue. Every Jewish home has the potential to instill the Jewish identity and values that sustain the Jewish people. The Jewish institutions that we devote ourselves to are the extensions of the home. Schools are not a substitute but an essential limb of the home and community. When families choose to entrust their children’s education and direct their dollars to Jewish day schools, they expect an experience that is distinct in its mission and implementation.

Jewish day school leaders can glean several key takeaways from the significance of mezuzah and the Jewish home to position schools favorably in advocating for support and partnerships from stakeholders.

**Connect how you convey Judaics with the ultimate goals of Jewish education.** The root of mezuzah is *zuz*, to move. Our ability to maintain our uniqueness even as we move outside of our homes is simply a reality that has resulted in our unlikely survival and vitality. This means our success in educating Jewishly is directly related to our expression of distinct values. We have an obligation to convey to our children that Judaic studies is distinct from general studies. It only stands to reason that the way we engage with our students in Judaics is the way they receive and ultimately live it. And sadly, the choices we often make are not connecting those dots.

**Partner with organizations to engage the home—and entire community.** The home, after all, houses literally everyone, including the stakeholders who directly fuel Jewish day schools. Few day schools have focused resources on parent engagement, and even fewer of those have cracked the code on how to make it work well. It’s a challenging nut to crack. Perhaps school-by-school parent engagement may not be the way to go. My husband, Louis, and I, among a growing number of philanthropists, encourage community partnerships that leverage each organization’s strengths. Why should this be any different? Instead of trying to create parent-education programs, perhaps schools need to reach out to existing organizations that are successful in adult education and engagement, to forge partnerships that address the needs of their school community. In this way, all stakeholders in the school are included, from parents to funders to influencers, without schools trying to be something they are not.

**Make it a responsibility to commit to self-evaluations as individuals and day schools.** In my work with JEIC (Jewish Education Innovation Challenge) in its first five years, we have prioritized catalyzing the field and developing new models of transmitting our holy subjects. What is clear is that it is time

to move into a phase of being serious about implementation and evaluation. How are the decisions we make influencing the students we serve? Are the policies, structure and evaluations conveying what we want to convey about Jewish studies and resulting in meeting the unique goals of a Jewish day school? Have we drifted from our tradition of rewarding effort into the trappings of rewarding results coming from outside the Jewish world? And most crucially, how can we develop school and community cultures that reflect the values we want to instill in our students?

**Reconsider the use of grades in Judaic studies.** It is inconsistent with Jewish wisdom to critically judge a Jew’s ability to learn Torah subjects by peer comparison or results-based evaluation. What we know for sure is that the Torah is accessible to everyone, “each according to his way.” The goal of building Jewish self-esteem is obvious. However, we cannot build this crucial internal muscle if we ascribe it to an evaluative process rooted in rewarding results instead of effort and resilience. We are feeling these results, painfully with every student who graduates without a lifelong love of Jewish learning. We are doing a huge disservice to the future of our nation by imitating a system of factory-model evaluation developed for subjects like math and history. Those subjects don’t cut to the core of a person’s identity. They aren’t subjects unique to a people with a responsibility to distinguish themselves among nations. Secular subjects don’t directly inform the values that build a home or a marriage. They don’t necessarily affect morals or ethical behavior. They don’t build future Jewish leaders.

Our success is reflected in the happiness and well-being of our graduates, not their job titles or income levels. As Jewish educators, our job first and foremost is to instill positive Jewish identity and passion that solidly informs how our graduates operate in the world, both ethically and courageously. While textual study is important, this is a “both, and” imperative. Memorizing that page of text is important, but not at the expense of the student’s self-esteem or the priority to instill a love of learning. We also must identify positive Jewish mentors to help our students develop their internal selves and their relationship with God, as well as their intellect.

It took an unimaginable amount of courage for those Jews in Egypt to take the blood of an Egyptian deity and paint it on their doorposts because God said so. Courage is essential for change and transformation. I attended the AIPAC policy conference in March and was touched by the words of Nikki Haley, US ambassador to the United Nations. She said, “The most important thing is to not be afraid to stick with the fundamental principles, even when they go against entrenched customs. Some of those outdated customs have gone unquestioned for years.”

Ambassador Haley presents a courage that is both greatly admirable and shocking. To dare to buck the status quo and think independently, while unique in politics, is in our Jewish DNA. We have had to reach inside the depths of our souls to courageously remain true to who we are in the face of the most extreme forms of adversity and temptations to assimilate. If we can access this courage as leaders—instead of being followers—in the education world, we will enable our future generations to fulfill their Jewish mission in this world.

# VOICES FROM THE FIELD



**DEBRA SHAFFER SEEMAN**  
NETWORK WEAVER

When coaching networking professionals, I'm often asked about Prizmah's "webinars," our virtual presentations offered by content-area experts, and "virtual roundtables," conversations among a group of school leaders. These webinars and roundtables form part of a large, robust set of opportunities within Prizmah's Reshet groups, networks for peer-to-peer connection. Just as we believe that school leaders who share their learning and expertise with colleagues contribute to the power of the field, we believe we should share some of Prizmah's thinking about the three central goals that these virtual convenings fill within Prizmah's broad Reshet portfolio, while inviting you to consider ways to meet these goals within your school.

Prizmah's robust webinar and roundtable calendar is reflective of the dynamic and responsive nature of our work. These convenings are often direct outgrowths of specific online conversations within a Reshet. Heads of school discussing their boards' practices of support and evaluation led to parallel webinars on the topic for heads and board leaders. Out of a conversation about progressive thinking on faculty compensation, a webinar for school heads and finance team members was organized within 48 hours. Similarly, a Judaic Administrator Reshet conversation about challenges of project-based learning quickly transitioned to a live virtual conversation featuring three principals with a range of experiences to share with colleagues. Key to the success of each of these convenings was the decentralized nature of their creation. Reshet members expressed a need and were empowered to bring the event to fruition, with the support of the Prizmah networking team. As such, the webinars and roundtables function as high-impact, timely responses to an expressed need in the field.

*In your community: Each school has faculty and lay leaders with unanswered questions and a willingness to come together to explore possible answers. Consider what it would take to empower them to find those answers as a community. How quickly can your school offer access to expert responses to faculty's toughest questions? Beyond feeling empowered to do so, does the faculty have time and resources allocated to the endeavor? If your school doesn't yet have a version of Genius Hour for your faculty—a time when they regularly explore their passions and research answers to the questions they're most passionate about—what might it look like?*

Prizmah's virtual roundtables enable school leaders to connect with one another in real time and learn from colleagues' hard-earned experiences. Roundtables have showcased dynamic head of school and development professional partnerships, elementary and high school leaders who are integrating STEAM and Makerspace into the Jewish studies curriculum, and successful marketing-admission teams. Each event provides a forum for school leaders to share their expertise. They offer a glimpse into one another's classrooms and offices, enabling leaders from one school to gain a strong understanding of another leader's philosophy of practice, tried-and-true strategies, celebrated mishaps and vision for future success. Presenters' resources and a recording of each event are then accessible to all other Reshet members through Prizmah's dedicated resource libraries.

*In your community: What does peer-to-peer learning look like in your own school? Are there ways to push it beyond the status quo? Consider how often faculty visit one another's classrooms and reflect on their observations. What are some mechanisms you might put into place in order to share that learning more widely?*

Rather than functioning as stand-alone events, Prizmah's webinars and virtual roundtables create additional pathways for colleague-to-colleague learning. Many of the virtual events include an invitation for continued connection. As such, the events function as springboards for deeper learning and continued partnership between schools and their leaders. Collegial working groups focused on exploring a specific topic, learning a new skill, or holding one another accountable for the implementation of a project have all grown out of webinars. Opportunities to join JDS Collaborative cohorts, where faculty from one school join colleagues from around North America to work on a well-defined project with the support of a skilled facilitator, amplify the network's capacity through the power of collaboration. Rather than functioning as islands in the sea of time, the webinars and roundtables serve as starting points in coming together for shared learning opportunities.

*In your community: Consider the ways in which professional development opportunities are woven into the fabric of the school year, rather than as one-off events. When smaller groups of school leaders choose to dive deeper into an area of interest, are there reserved and dedicated times that are available to them for collaboration? Is there anyone on faculty who will support them as needed so that they're able to see the work through to completion?*

MARC WOLF  
 DANIEL HELD  
 KIM HIRSH  
 CHAVIE N. KAHN  
 NANCY KRIEGLER

# Two to Tango: Day Schools and Federations

IN A RECENT CONVERSATION ABOUT THE SIZABLE EFFORTS MADE IN ENGLAND TO STRENGTHEN JEWISH DAY SCHOOLS AND YESHIVAS, RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS SUMMARIZED THE URGENT NEED FOR COMMUNAL SUPPORT: "THE WORLD OUR CHILDREN WILL INHERIT TOMORROW IS BORN IN THE SCHOOLS WE BUILD TODAY." IN THE 21ST CENTURY, WE ARE BLESSED TO HAVE INHERITED JEWISH DAY SCHOOLS AND YESHIVAS THAT ARE BUILT ON THE EXPERIENCE, KNOWLEDGE AND PASSION OF COUNTLESS LEADERS WHO INVESTED IN CREATING AND STRENGTHENING THEM. HOW DO WE AS A COMMUNITY CARE FOR THAT INHERITANCE SO THAT IT ENDURES THROUGHOUT FUTURE GENERATIONS?

The Jewish day school and yeshiva experience is not only an evolutionary step for the North American Jewish community, but also a revolutionary one. Today's schools are immersive and intensive, teaching the sacred and the modern. We educate students to embrace the legacy of their tradition and the wonders of the secular culture and society. Day schools and yeshivas connect students to the broader Jewish people and to the modern State of Israel, as well as to their role as citizens of a free society. We teach our students to use the wisdom of our past to contextualize our present so that they may shape their future.

While our children may learn the same *alef beis* as generations ago did in *cheder*, today's schools have achieved more than any previous generation. As we find ourselves in the midst of the third generation of Jewish day schools in North America, the question of endurance is all the more salient. Acknowledging the many challenges facing Jewish day schools (as did the recent study "Challenges and Opportunities on the Jewish Day School Landscape: A Thought and Action Paper for Jewish Federations"), some wonder if there will be Jewish day schools and yeshivas to inherit for the next generation.

What steps can we take to not only protect our inheritance, but help it grow to sustain and maintain the generations to come?

This article is a product of the growing partnership between the North American Day School Strategy and Planning Group and Prizmah. The NADSSPG comprises professionals from central agencies for Jewish education and federations in 11 major communities who focus on the strategic vision for day schools. Day schools and yeshivas have no greater ally at the community level than federations and central agencies. Over the past 15 years, we have seen the significant impact of partnerships between federations and schools. Following is a brief exploration of some of the ways these partnerships have made a difference, with an urgent call that communities consider the ways these strategies can help all who see themselves as custodians of the remarkable inheritance.

## CHAMPIONING THE CONTRIBUTION OF DAY SCHOOLS TO THE COMMUNAL LANDSCAPE

Vibrant Jewish communities attract Jewish families, Jewish communal professionals, clergy and lay leadership who are looking for a deep community infrastructure. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 17b) is the first to identify the importance of Jewish educational institutions as some of the essential components of a Jewish community. By promoting and supporting local schools on the communal level, federations and Jewish day schools attract a wide range of Jewish families who can establish roots and dedicate their lives and resources to furthering their community. This is something that smaller communities know very well, where sometimes having even one Jewish day school or yeshiva can determine the ability to attract talented professionals.

In places with multiple schools, support and advocacy from federations can position Jewish day schools and yeshivas not as competitors for families and students, but rather as a collective, a pillar of the community. From this posture, schools view themselves as part of a greater whole and work toward the benefit of all the schools as well as their own. This approach has an impact both on how the community perceives its schools as well as how they relate to and speak about each other.

Beyond these benefits to the community and the schools, by elevating the presence of Jewish day schools and yeshivas in the community, school leaders have an opportunity to play a more active role in the broader communal landscape.

## ESTABLISHING AND SECURING FINANCIAL VITALITY

While federations are by no means limited to financial support, investment of communal funds in our schools is of course essential. In recent years, we have been fortunate to witness very significant initiatives to tackle the challenge of affordability. We have seen impressive campaigns, often shepherded by federations, to grow day school endowments. These partnerships are critical for long-term sustainability. Federations can serve as a partner for Jewish day schools and yeshivas in additional revenue-generating ways, such as funding access to outside experts on enrollment, fundraising and governance, the three domains most closely linked to school financial health. Federation professionals themselves, with local expertise, can also serve as mentors and coaches for day school leaders engaged in strategies towards financial stability.

In communities where demographic studies are conducted, federations can partner with day schools and yeshivas to help schools analyze the data in order to identify specific levers or messages that will help attract more families to their schools. In all communities, especially those with limited financial resources, partnership between federations and the Jewish day schools and yeshivas can lead to cross-community collaboration and efficient sharing of precious assets and services to benefit the whole community.

## CONVENING THE COMMUNITY AROUND EDUCATION

In most communities, the federation holds a unique position as community convener, offering programming and funding for initiatives that reach across denominational and generational boundaries. The opportunities for partnership with our schools are extensive. Jewish day schools and yeshivas can become an educational home for the broader Jewish community. When facilities are not in use by school-aged children, the school can play host to educational programming for all ages. In addition, as community convener, federations can bring together educators and other community leaders for joint professional development, leveraging the wisdom of outside experts as well as the experience of home-grown talent. Federations can be instrumental in developing a community among local professionals that extends beyond the walls of a school.

These are just three areas that are ripe for exploration between local federations and Jewish day schools and yeshivas. As was stated above, there are communities that are shining examples of these leading practices, and many efforts are already underway to build on these successes. The Jewish Federations of North America recently hosted a conversation as part of the last General Assembly titled “Banim u’Vonim—Children and Builders: A Day School Conversation,” where a number of these topics were explored, and the Jewish Education and Engagement Office of JFNA continues to focus on strengthening the Federation and day school partnership.

Working together to expand these and other efforts, Prizmah, JFNA and the North American Day School Strategy and Planning Group are partnering with Jewish day schools and yeshivas in North America to ensure that our inheritance does in fact become a profound legacy for the next generation.



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### TEACHING AND LEARNING

# PLC: BUILDING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

JUDY WEINSTOCK AND NICOLE KRIDOS  
GENERAL STUDIES TEACHERS  
KATZ HILLEL DAY SCHOOL  
BOCA RATON, FLORIDA

Our school, like many others, offers optional Professional Learning Communities, or PLCs, where teachers across grade levels can come together and share what they are doing in their classes and learn from their colleagues. I have had the pleasure of facilitating these meetings for three years, with a cohort of five teachers each guiding a PLC. Throughout this time, our PLC work has been supported by Prizmah coach Melanie Eisen; we meet monthly to discuss our success and challenges in facilitation, and she provides new ideas and resources for each of the PLCs. PLCs provide opportunities for teachers to ensure their students are learning, create a culture of collaboration and institute actionable results. We set goals for the year including confidentiality, honesty, participation, open-mindedness, a promise to support each other's learning and the ability to discuss the "undiscussable." The topic for this year is building student engagement.

One of the main concerns teachers have in the classroom is motivating their students to want to learn the material they are teaching. As educators, we approach teaching with a passion and a drive to be masters in our content areas, while striving to build lasting relationships with our students. By focusing on the ways we can better engage our students to want to learn and participate in their growth, we as teachers can start to help our students on a path of accountability and success in the classroom.

Specific topics are chosen and presented at each meeting. The first presentation concerned teaching students using state-of-the-art modalities, such as online classes and flipping the classroom. Integrating technology in the classroom can promote and extend student learning on a daily basis. Next, we heard evidence on inquiry-based learning. Educators were encouraged to build a culture of inquiry, empowering students to ask questions such as, How do I problem-solve through this? How do I persevere when things are tough? What strategies can I use to help me solve this problem? One strategy given was to begin a class with teacher-guided inquiry, where teachers model how to develop questions over a series of lessons, showing students that there are multiple ways to solve problems. This prepares students to lead their own inquiry by the end of a unit. Strategies like this encourage students to think critically and develop strong problem-solving skills.

At the third meeting, we discussed building a classroom community as an important way to foster student engagement. Research revealed that students who feel a sense of identity within a group are the most well-adjusted and successful in school. Examples presented were focusing on the classroom space to make it feel familiar, and giving it a sense of warmth and beauty. In addition, students respond well to feeling safe, knowing they can trust their teachers, having a predictable routine and seeing examples of family involvement.

Subsequently, student voice and choice was discussed. This is the idea that the teacher is no longer the only one giving information, and that we are permitted to tell our students we don't know or understand something ourselves. Five suggestions for implementation were offered: ask the students what they want to learn about in the content area; create teams to come up with questions related to the topic; assess the students' needs and wants; modeling think-alouds; and allowing students to have choice of a project or alternative assessment options. Throughout all these presentations, fellow teachers were asked to provide feedback and examples of how they can implement these strategies in their own classrooms.

Ultimately, the group was a strong example of the positive impact teachers can have on each other's growth and learning. Through peer observations and group discussions, we achieved improvement in many areas. We learned to share our successes and failures and, most importantly, how to better reach our students through several engagement strategies. We also discovered that the essential element to engaging our students in our classrooms was US! It is not the number of manipulatives or materials, or the size of your space that really matters. It is our loving, compassionate attitude towards the children in our classroom and the intrinsic motivation to be better educators that propel us forward to reaching our goals.

# The Value Proposition of Reform Day Schools

WHY SHOULD REFORM JEWS CHOOSE DAY SCHOOL? AND WHY DOES THE REFORM MOVEMENT NEED DAY SCHOOLS?

MIRIAM  
HELLER STERN

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To some, the answers to these questions may be obvious; and for others, provocative. Reform day schools are designed to deliver high-quality education in an authentic, immersive Jewish environment in which Reform ideologies are practiced and celebrated. And yet, historically, the Reform movement championed public school education as part of its commitment to striving for a just and equal society. Reform day schools gained the official endorsement of the Reform movement in 1985, in a statement that simultaneously affirmed the movement's continued commitment to the democratic value of participation in public schooling.

The competing priorities of investing in immersive Jewish education and supporting public education have made day school advocacy in the Reform movement complicated. During the height of day school expansion in 2004, PEJE convened a group of Reform rabbis and educational thought leaders to explore what it might mean to amplify the Reform movement's commitment to day schools and expand the network. As Michael Zeldin, then director of day school initiatives at the Rhea Hirsch School of Education at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, recalls, they reasoned that while the Orthodox and Conservative day school populations were fairly stable, there was tremendous potential for growth in enrollment among Reform families, who constitute about a third of American Jewry.

In their article "Day Schools for Reform Jews, Too," Zeldin, with Rabbi David Ellenson, articulated the rationale for Reform day school education: "Many Jewish parents, and we include ourselves, feel that an intense exposure for our children to the ethical-religious-national heritage that is Judaism constitutes as invaluable resource for educating and preparing our children for participation in a pluralistic and expanding world. ... The values and traditions that our children will learn from a liberal Jewish perspective in [Reform] day schools will cause our children to contribute as Jews to the American public square in an authentic liberal Jewish voice. ... If we educate our children in schools that allow for optimal exposure to Judaism, we will foster their maturation as knowledgeable and serious liberal Jews."

The number of Reform day schools grew to 24 during the day school boom of the early 2000s. In the wake of the recession and the challenge of affordability, there are now only a dozen Reform day schools in the United States and Canada. Even with this decline, communities like Los Angeles, Boston, Atlanta, Scottsdale, Houston, Toronto, New York and Miami still boast strong, values-driven Reform day schools. About two-thirds of the schools reside in Reform congregations, where they are part of a broader Jewish ecosystem inclusive of a preschool, religious school, b'nai mitzvah programming, youth groups and family education.



One challenge in growing the Reform day school population was the small number of Reform leaders who had personal experience with day schools. Many aspiring Reform rabbis had their formative Jewish educational experiences in summer camps, congregational schools and youth engagement, including social justice programming and Israel experiences. As young leaders, they often imagine themselves serving in the types of environments that nourished their own Jewish souls.

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion partnered with PARDES (and now Prizmah) to develop a pipeline of Reform leaders who would understand and advocate for day schools. Rabbinic, education and cantorial students can apply to participate in the Day School Externship, a course that immerses them in a day school, often for their first time. Under the faculty leadership of Dr. Michael Zeldin, Rabbi Sam Joseph, PhD, and Dr. Lesley Litman, the students are embedded in the culture of a day school for a week, where they observe and teach classes, lead tefillah and join celebrations. They participate in the rhythm of the school day from carpool to pickup, experiencing how the school culture is itself a pedagogical tool. They speak with teachers, administration, students, staff and lay leaders. They ask a lot of questions. Their HUC faculty guide them through a week of participant observation and reflection, relationship building, and taking note of educational practices they might incorporate into their own toolboxes. Beth Am Day School in Miami is the 2018 host to 10 rabbinical and education students from the Los Angeles, Cincinnati and New York campuses.

There is some truth to the cliché “seeing is believing”: The opportunity to meet students who love their school, teachers who take pride in the work, and lay leaders who breathe the mission of the school is compelling to HUC students, especially when they are just beginning to imagine the trajectories of their careers and the creative approaches to Jewish learning that they may embrace. Reform day schools are laboratories for tefillah, project-based learning, Hebrew language learning and technology integration. Students come away inspired by the powerful learning and living that takes place.

Reflections by alumni about the externship reveal a deep commitment to the values that day schools embody: a commitment to rigorous learning; kindness and compassion; leadership; and the infusion of Jewish values into everyday living. For participants whose Judaism was fortified at camp, day school is a reminder that an immersive Jewish learning environment can be created year-round. Time is always a limitation in a part-time learning program; graduate students who have not witnessed day school before report being captivated by the potential for deepening Jewish commitment when the time for learning is so dramatically increased. Once they participate in the externship, the students report that they are more likely to recommend a local day school to their congregants or pursue employment in a day school.

There are several practical ways that all liberal and community day schools can increase the Reform presence in their schools. Day schools would benefit from inviting local Reform rabbis and educators to visit and experience the school culture firsthand, including observing classes, participating in tefillah, meeting student leaders, and conferring with lay leaders, founders and parents. Reform clergy and congregational lay leadership could be assets to day school boards. Finally, day school educators and congregational leaders can collaborate to create integrated programs with the congregations' youth groups and family education programs.

As Prizmah develops each facet of its multid denominational framework, the Reform presence in the landscape of day schools remains essential for supporting liberal Jewish life. The blending of progressive educational values and progressive Jewish values make the school day more holistic and less bifurcated than some dual-curriculum day schools. Their flavor of Judaism can appeal to a wide swath of American Jewry; Reform Jews are more likely to choose schools that espouse their values and customs and make them feel at home. They provide a welcoming space for interfaith families in an immersive Jewish learning context. While the number of Reform schools is small, their potential audience is still great. The HUC-JIR-Prizmah Day School Externship aims to ensure the continued growth of Reform day school education as a visible and viable option for Jewish learners.

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**PRIZMAH**

Center for Jewish Day Schools

# Jewish Schools, for Everyone

In 1965, Shlomo Bardin, the visionary educator and founder of the Brandeis Camp Institute, articulated his case for establishing a college preparatory high school at the site in California. He declared that “the new Academy at Brandeis, California, is based on the premise that Judaism has something to say and to offer in regard to the conduct of [hu]man[ity] in our world.”

Believing that all people had something to learn from Judaism, Bardin called for the school to “be open to all Jews and non-Jews, to black and white, to students from the United States and other lands.” His dream was not realized during his lifetime, but today there are at more than 20 Jewish schools in North America that admit Jews and non-Jews. It is now time for all American Jewish day schools to consider welcoming both Jewish and non-Jewish students and families into their classrooms, playgrounds and communities.

After all, Bardin was right: Jews *do* have something offer to humanity. As Abraham understood when he heard the divine voice for the first time, we can be a blessing to all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:3). However, because of the particular way Jewish history has unfolded over the past 2,000 years, we have had few opportunities to share that blessing without fear of reprisal. Today things are different. Even though there has been a recent uptick in anti-Semitism, it is still the case that Jews in America feel safer, more respected and more welcomed than Jews have felt at any point in history. Surely this is the time to shine what light we can onto humanity—while, of course, affirming that we can be illuminated by others also.

But we should not reconsider our enrollment policies only because we have the opportunity to do so; we should also do it out of a sense of obligation. We live at a time like no other in human history. Today, the ravages of war have resulted in a refugee crisis that has resulted in a permanent precariat of approximately 65 million people. The lives of hundreds of millions more are impacted by terror, abuse, poverty and the other innumerable ills that have come to define our societies and the world. We are also feeling the devastating effects of human-induced climate change, the fear of nuclear war, and the unanticipated and destructive power of unfettered industrialization and technological advancement that combine to threaten to bring the miracle of human existence to a premature end. The fundamental question that confronts Judaism at this time is, therefore, do we have something to bring to the advancement of humanity, or do we not?

I believe emphatically that the answer is yes. As such, we have an obligation to share the wisdom, values, beliefs and practices of Judaism as widely as we possibly can. One avenue for achieving this is through opening the doors of our Jewish day schools to all students and families, Jewish or otherwise.

To those who are resistant to such a proposal, here are some other arguments in its favor:

Jewish day schools already include many who do not self-identify as Jews. Parents, faculty and staff members, board members and donors often include non-Jews. If we are comfortable accepting non-Jews in those parts of our school communities, why not in our student body?

In many day schools that only admit students that self-identify as Jewish, the student body often includes those that are (lamentably) not considered Jewish by other members of the school community.

Examples include students who are Jewish by patrilineal descent, or whose parents, or themselves, converted to Judaism in a manner not in keeping with the standards of other streams of Judaism. In such cases, what is the meaningful difference between one type of “non-Jew” and another?

Regarding concerns about dating between Jews and non-Jews, we need to face the realities of contemporary American Jewish life. Jewish families that include Jews and non-Jews are more the norm than the exception these days and, despite the scare tactics of the prior generation and establishment leaders, it has not been a death knell for Jewish life in America. In fact, the opposite has been true. (See the 2013 Pew study, Karen McGinty, *Still Jewish: A History of Women and Inter-marriage in America, Marrying Out: Jewish Men, Inter-marriage, and Fatherhood*, and Samira Mehta, *Beyond Chrismukkah: The Christian-Jewish Interfaith Family in the United States*.)

In a related way, as American Jews have become more integrated into the rich and diverse tapestry of American life, the simple binary of “Jew” and “non-Jew” has become a less than accurate way to understand American Jewish identity. In truth, most American Jews are now hybrids, possessing multiple and overlapping identities. Our enrollment policies must reflect the complexity of identity in contemporary American life and welcome not only those who self-identify as Jewish, but also those who wish to participate in the life of the Jewish community, just as so many Jews participate in the larger American reality.

Finally, it is unfortunate that a community with such a tragic history of exclusion would want to maintain exclusive policies for their own institutions.

Now, inviting non-Jews into Jewish schools is not simply a question of policy. There are also a number of practical considerations that must be considered. The presence of “non-Jews” (in quotations to remind us that the binary isn’t all that meaningful anymore) in our schools will also force us to reconsider our formal and experiential Jewish curriculum.

We will need to identify those aspects of Jewish wisdom, values, beliefs and practices that will serve humankind in the pursuit of a more just and compassionate world. And yes, we will have to rethink the place of Hebrew language so that the learning is accessible to all students. In addition, we will have to invite those families from other religions and wisdom traditions (including unchurched atheists) to share the best of their own knowledge and experience so that our Jewish schools are open to the talmudic view that truth is found in many places (Shabbat 104a).

This kind of Jewish school would be a paradigm shift for Jewish education and would be a meaningful step towards achieving the ultimate goal of all Jewish schools (even if they don’t use these exact words): to bring blessing to all the families of the world.

It is time for the lay and professional leadership of these 20-plus schools, and any others that are considering a similar move, to hear from each other and learn about the opportunities and challenges that face our diverse communities. Then, the findings should be disseminated to all Jewish day schools so that they can make informed decisions about their own enrollment policies. To do anything less, I believe, is to underestimate the power of Jewish day schools to influence the world for the better and would represent our failure to deliver on the biblical charge to be a light unto the nations.

# Mission Impossible: The Limits of Vision

I like reading mission statements. I know that sounds strange, but as I visit schools around the country, I have found that one can learn much about individual schools from these brief statements. Before I enter a school's hallways, I read its mission statement to become acquainted with how it defines itself. What are its overall priorities? What population does it seek to serve? What are its core values? What are its educational priorities, what is its vision of its students' future? If one looks closely, all this can be inferred from a clear mission statement. And if one reads enough of them, one can gain insight into what is consistent and most vital to the beliefs of day schools as a system. One can learn both what makes each school unique and what is central to our schools as a whole.

A mission statement is in some ways an odd document. Created by the school, it then pivots and functions as the school's ultimate authority. Significantly, these statements can be changed periodically by the very group that wrote it. In this way, a school remains responsive to changes in the world around it. But this notion leads to the question of whether there are constraints on how far a board can go to adopt a new mission and remain true to its identity as a Jewish day school. Can a board of trustees, in changing its mission, move so far away from its original intention that it ceases to be a Jewish day school and becomes something different altogether? I want to answer this question by looking at the themes in our mission statements and applying these themes to the issue of admission to our schools of non-Jewish students.

What is striking to me is how consistent mission statements are. Most of the mission statements I have read over the years speak to schools' educational programs and religious orientation. Not surprisingly, there is great variation in how day schools define their educational and religious missions. They define themselves as progressive or traditional, as emphasizing subject matter or innovative process, as a balanced curriculum or an integrated one. They speak of their religious orientation and how it plays out through holiday celebrations, in daily rituals, the joy of learning mitzvot or universal values. Most day schools include these two areas as part of their mission, though their emphasis and interpretation vary from school to school.

But what is particularly dramatic to me is the area in which all day school mission statements are the same. Fundamental to all our schools is our vision of the future of the Jewish people and our belief in the school's role in preparing our children to be members of the Jewish community. While Jewish ritual practice, pedagogic methods and educational content vary, Jewish day schools are consistently dedicated to fostering the perpetuation of the Jewish people by instilling a commitment to our community and our history into their students. All the mission statements with which I am familiar describe as their purpose the creation of a new community of Jewish children and training their students to become serious and active participants in the future of the Jewish people. Part of this idea begins as a focus on the individual child, referring to the school as a "mensch factory," a place in which menschlichkeit can be nurtured and acts of chesed can be performed. Thus, rather than intellectual goals, the ultimate mission of a Jewish day school is a deeply spiritual and affective one. It is to develop shared core values. And it is this vision of historic kinship that makes our schools essential as a movement.

One significance of the prominent place of peoplehood in our mission statements and kinship in our schools is that it places a constraint on school leadership on the issue of admitting non-Jewish children. To be sure, defining and balancing our Jewish identities as members of both an ethnic as well as a religious community is nothing new in Jewish history. My point is not that this is a great revelation, but rather to suggest how universal and central this theme is to understanding the reasons why our schools exist. The commonality in our mission statements of instilling a sense of peoplehood, Jewish community, love of Israel and support for the State of Israel, and of cultivating the sense that our personal identity is rooted in our common history, is fundamental and a powerful indication of how significant we view these outcomes. The universal heart of our mission statements is a kind of mystical vision of the next Jewish generation, the initiation of a child into the sanctity of belonging to something greater than oneself.

The question arises as to what happens to a day school's mission when this core value of peoplehood is removed or compromised. Reading our schools' mission statements indicates to me that the spiritual commitment to a shared future is inviolable. If a Jewish school opened its doors to students who were not Jewish, both of whose parents were not Jewish and who had no intention of converting, then I would feel that the mission of the school had lost sight of its essential spiritual and historic nature. Should a community organize its mission around the notion that admitting both non-Jews as well as Jews, I would be quite interested to see such a school in operation, to understand how it handles the issues confronted by an integrated curriculum and how it deals with the relationship between its intellectual and affective goals. But to me it would not be a Jewish day school; it would be something different, authentic and valid for its unique vision, but not a Jewish day school.

At the very least, would it not be disingenuous of a day school, with its natural commitment to preparing its students to help ensure a Jewish future, to admit non-Jews? I believe that a school has the right to a changed mission, either through the excitement of a dramatic new vision or in response to the challenges of declining enrollment. But if embraced, a school runs the risk of reaching for "a bridge too far," a mission that no longer qualifies it as a Jewish day school.



# Discovering the Unknown: More Research to Make the Case for Hebrew Language Learning

IF A PROSPECTIVE PARENT WERE TO ASK YOU AS HEAD OF SCHOOL, "HOW DOES YOUR SCHOOL TEACH READING?" YOU WOULD HAVE ACCESS TO AN OVERWHELMING NUMBER OF STUDIES ON HOW CHILDREN LEARN TO READ AND WHAT METHODS ARE MOST EFFECTIVE. BUT IF A DONOR WHO WISHED TO PROVIDE SUPPORT TO ADVANCE HEBREW LANGUAGE LEARNING ASKED, "WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO TEACH HEBREW? THAT'S HOW I WANT TO INVEST IN THIS SCHOOL," THERE IS NO EQUIVALENT RESEARCH ON WHICH TO BASE AN ANSWER.

Just as marketing, communications, PR and word of mouth are tools for day school advocacy, it is important that Jewish schools have research and data to support the Judaic side of their programs, as they do in general studies. The Consortium for Applied Studies in Jewish Education (CASJE) has responded to the gap in Jewish educational research with a set of literature reviews, among other efforts. We will use these reviews as an example of how research may be mobilized to make the case for Jewish day schools.

CASJE's Hebrew Language Education Literature Reviews serve at least two vital functions. The first is the obvious clarity and direction they give for educators challenged in the day-to-day work of teaching Hebrew. The second, less obvious but equally important, is the way access to this research professionalizes the teaching of Hebrew by giving educators the expertise to make thoughtful, researched-based decisions and, thereby, present a compelling case for Hebrew language learning more generally. While we will focus here on some of the practical lessons we can take away from the literature reviews, we believe the second point carries weight in the ever-increasing demand placed upon day schools to justify their mission to a community that questions its value. The benefit of even these few studies suggests that more sustained and robust programs of research hold the potential to advance the field exponentially, and as a result, provide a compelling value proposition for the work Jewish day schools do.

The first research review, written by Chad Walker, details the unique aspects of Hebrew writing, the challenges students face in learning how to read Hebrew as a foreign language, and the ways in which having a first language (particularly English) can aid or present difficulty not only to learning a second language in general, but Hebrew in particular. (To be clear, foreign language teaching is different from teaching a first language.) He makes a fascinating observation into the gap between facility in Hebrew reading and comprehension of Hebrew texts.

Hebrew is composed of three-letter roots, or *shorashim*, which, depending on their various constructions, prefixes and suffixes, as well as vowelizations, have quite disparate if related meanings. If students are not familiar with a word but are familiar with the root, they may be able to develop comprehension of a word, even if they cannot read it properly. In English, by contrast, because of the absence of a root system, it is far more likely that one needs to be able to read a word properly in order to develop comprehension. This difference has implications for the strategies we use to teach young students to read Hebrew, especially after having learned to read English. Additionally, it is an important insight that poor articulation of written words does not necessarily correlate with poor comprehension when it comes to Hebrew.

The educational value of Walker's review is clear. At the same time, having this knowledge in the hands of day school leaders and teachers has an important role to play in supporting areas like recruitment and retention. Parents who are unfamiliar with Hebrew as a language may see their children reading words incorrectly and may conclude mistakenly that their children do not understand what is taking place in Hebrew classes. When educators can explain the differences between learning English and learning Hebrew because of its unique root system, parents will gain a greater appreciation for both what day schools are doing and why, and the expertise needed to help parents feel confident about their child's education and their investment.

Sharon Avni has written a study on the relationship between language and identity that is especially important, given the place Jewish identity holds in the mission of day schools. Because many Jews learn



Hebrew for its utility as a marker of Jewishness, Avni notes the importance of motivation, particularly the motivation to be on the inside of a community (here, a community whose boundaries include speaking Hebrew) when learning to speak or read.

She points out the important finding that motivation in second or foreign language education has a greater impact than ability or aptitude—something educators, who often desire Hebrew proficiency (as this is what they are called upon to do), neglect at their peril. This is because learning Hebrew is not only about the skill itself, or the ability to function in the language (which can also be highly valued), but the identity and social connections that comes about as a result. Of course, the opposite could be true: Students could have a decrease in motivation because of a desire to separate from a Jewish or Israeli identity. Both are important understandings for Jewish educators when thinking about the kind of connections they make in class, and materials they introduce to students. As with Walker’s review, Avni raises important questions for educators, and provides opportunities to make the case for day schools by focusing on the unique value of Hebrew language learning to Jewish identity.

A paper by Avital Feuer shows ways that our field can use the research on Heritage Language (HL) learning and its application to identity development. In schools, we often focus on our core activities—curriculum development, material selection, instructional strategies—and the ways these choices improve *learning*. Feuer used the HL research to focus our attention on different criteria that are no less important, but not often top of mind for Hebrew language educators.

One example is the importance of school structure in shaping a students’ educational experience. Is the school a day or supplementary school? Is its focus on social activism, to teach communal pride or ethnic values, or is it language proficiency? The answer to each of these questions leads to very different notions of identity development and to different models of Hebrew programming.

Given that children mimic their parents and their values, Feuer underscores the importance of how Hebrew is used at home:

Is it only used for ritual? For parts of common conversation or reference? As a valued commodity? Relationships with family or friends influence identity and motivation, hence the importance of twinning programs and Israel trips. However, how much do these programs impact learning Hebrew, and what priority should these approaches be given?

Referencing the type of research reviewed above when working with families to understand how their children are progressing, when engaging prospective families in explaining how our schools teach, and in speaking with donors in making the case for Jewish day schools has the potential to elevate our field. This research may be marshalled to advocate, both explicitly and implicitly from its very reference, that Jewish education is a serious and significant endeavor.

We believe that using educational research is essential in advocating for Jewish day schools. Our field already does this when we speak to the general studies side of our work. However, we have only a limited amount of high-quality research to point to in advocating for the distinct value proposition in the Judaic studies—half of our curricula—and to improve our educational practices. Ironically, it is this part of our schools that both defines who we are and holds the potential to distinguish us from every other educational option prospective students, families and funders are choosing from.

In 1997, the United States Congress asked the National Institutes of Health along with the Department of Education to form the National Reading Panel to review research on how children learn to read and determine which methods of teaching reading are most effective based on the research evidence. That research has been used for over two decades to improve literacy and drive policy decisions among education advocates. The initial products on Hebrew language learning from CASJE-sponsored work suggest that the same is possible for Jewish education. We see an opportunity for schools to advance their missions by citing and using this research on a regular basis. We also see the further development of significant applied research as an investment in the future vitality of day schools.

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NILI SIMHAI  
Yael Steiner

# Cultivating Families through Community Programs



ON A CHILLY MORNING IN DECEMBER, A FAMILY OF FOUR WALKS INTO A DAY SCHOOL FOR A CHANUKAH PROGRAM. THE SCHOOL'S ART TEACHER LEADS A CANDLE-MAKING WORKSHOP, ASSISTED BY A FEW EIGHTH-GRADE VOLUNTEERS. AFTER DONUTS, APPLE CIDER AND SHMOOZING, THE MUSIC TEACHER LEADS THE GROUP IN CHANUKAH SONGS AND STORIES. THIS SCENE MIGHT BE FOUND AT HUNDREDS OF DAY SCHOOLS. THE DIFFERENCE: AT THIS LOVELY CHANUKAH PROGRAM, MOST OF THE FAMILIES PARTICIPATING DO NOT HAVE CHILDREN ENROLLED AT THE SCHOOL.



Why would a day school invest valuable time and resources in running community programs for non-enrolled families? As a number of schools have discovered, a strategic, targeted approach to community programs can be a fantastic investment for a school while also providing a much-needed service to the community. Community programs allow a school to showcase its dynamic teachers and educational philosophy, provide participants with a taste of what their school has to offer, and cultivate relationships with prospective families and donors.

One initiative that has been seeing positive results from this approach is the PJ Library-Prizmah Day School Engagement and Enrollment initiative (DSEE), supported by The AVI CHAI Foundation and PJ Library Alliance. This initiative aims to make day schools into community engagement hubs, with the dual goal of serving under-affiliated Jewish families and cultivating relationships with new families for day school enrollment. Working with 16 schools in its first two years, DSEE programs inspired 43 families who were completely unfamiliar with the school to enroll, and influenced another 144 families to enroll as well. The Brandeis Marin school in San Rafael, California, considers these programs their “single best marketing and outreach effort,” and the Ronald C. Wornick Jewish Day School in Foster City, California,

reports these events “effectively nurture ongoing relationships with new and known families, while also showcasing the school’s inquiry-based approach to education.”

Whether they are part of DSEE or not, many schools have discovered the benefits of becoming a community engagement hub. For schools interested in running programs for the community, here are some key questions to consider.

## WHO IS OUR TARGET AUDIENCE, AND WHAT ARE THEY LOOKING FOR?

When designing programs, it’s easy to jump straight into brainstorming activities before thinking through the needs and interests of those you are trying to attract. We caution against the “If you build it, they will come” approach, especially when trying to attract an audience that is different from the families you typically serve. It’s critical to pinpoint who you are trying to reach, understand their interests, and identify where the gaps are in programs currently offered in your community, so that you can design programs liable to be successful.

Your target audience will vary based on your goal for offering community engagement programs, and the particular makeup of your

community. For schools that want to cultivate new families for enrollment, their target audience could be families in a particular neighborhood with a growing Jewish population, families with children in a particular age group or families with a stay-at-home parent. For schools designing programs to cultivate new donors, their target audience could be individuals working in a particular industry or friends of the grandparents of current students.

Once you've identified a target audience, you can begin to explore their needs. Ideally, this involves reaching out to members of the target audience to ask them about their needs and interests. Is your target audience families with young children, who might attend your kindergarten in a few years? Perhaps they need a place to go on a Sunday morning with a fun program for their three-year-old that is over in time for a morning nap. Is your target audience Israeli families? Maybe they would appreciate a program with strong Hebrew content and opportunities for parents to socialize. Are you doing outreach in a particular neighborhood? Perhaps your school can host some programs in that neighborhood or even in someone's home. Although it can seem counterintuitive to host a program away from your school, it can actually be a great way to introduce new families to your school community in a neutral setting.

Schools such as the Hannah Senesh Day School have looked to their own neighborhoods to uncover what the local needs are. Sundays@Senesh is open to anyone in the neighborhood, providing a Brooklyn-friendly playspace for newborns to five-year-olds, with bagels and coffee for the adults. By providing this service to the community, they have created a space for families to socialize and get to know the school at the same time.

Once you have some ideas of what families are looking for and how you might help with that, it is equally important to make sure you are marketing to those families in a way that will actually reach them. Be sure to go beyond the usual synagogue newsletters and other Jewish venues. Consider social media parent groups, family sections of the paper or even flyers at that favorite yoga studio.

## WHAT MAKES OUR SCHOOL ATTRACTIVE?

Now that you've identified your target audience and thought about their needs, you can focus on the aspects of your school that you would like to showcase. What makes your school unique? Which aspects of the program or school resources are sources of pride?

Whether it's an exceptional music teacher who integrates music throughout the curriculum, a school garden where children make connections between Jewish holidays and nature, or a group of eighth grade students who model the traits that your school seeks to cultivate, think about what makes your school shine and how you can highlight those strengths through programming. Ideally, program ideas emerge out of the intersection of what families are looking for and what your school has to offer.

At Golda Och Academy in West Orange, New Jersey, Lower School Director of Admissions Mara Suskauer designed a "STEM Extravaganza" program for young families to showcase their recently built STEM center. Families rotated through a series of activities, including making LED light-up pins, playing a coding challenge game and listening to a PJ Library book about Albert Einstein. Mara had to close registration due to overwhelming interest, demonstrating that they successfully identified an activity that parents were excited about.

At Silver Academy in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, Director of Admissions Jaclyn Rubin created a "Groovy Art Party in the Hut" program for Sukkot, led by the school's art teacher. Families created sukkah decorations and tie-dye shirts, and ate dinner together in the sukkah. The program was held on Columbus Day, when schools are closed and parents seek out activities for their kids.

## HOW DO WE MAKE FAMILIES FEEL WELCOME?

When designing programs for the community, it's critical to consider all of the details that go into creating a welcoming environment.

### Marketing

A program flyer or advertisement is the first opportunity to make a family feel welcome and excited about your school. Your program name should be catchy, appeal to the interests of your audience and focus on the core activity that will draw families in. The language that you lead with can have a pivotal impact. We advise participants in DSEE also to use Hebrew sparingly in flyers, given the audience they are trying to reach. For example, a flyer with "Come to the Torah School Tu Bishvat Party" in large font, with smaller text below that describes the activities, could turn away someone who doesn't know much about Tu Bishvat and has no relationship with the school. In contrast, "Join us for Nature Songs, Stories and Crafts" in large

font, with smaller text below that describes the connection to Tu Bishvat and the school, may be more effective in drawing in families. Cost of attendance should be minimal so that programs are accessible to all.

### Creating welcoming spaces

Designing a welcoming space involves thinking through the attendees' experience from the moment they drive into the parking lot to when they leave your program. Important elements include clear signage that points attendees to where they need to go, staff or volunteers serving as greeters, a registration table and name tags. The staff members and parent, student or alumni volunteers who help out at your program are ambassadors of your school and social connectors. They are instrumental in setting the tone for the program, engaging with families and introducing families to one other.

### Providing accessible content

When designing programs for the community, consider how you will showcase the rich Jewish learning that happens at your school, while ensuring that the content is accessible and engaging for families with varying levels of Jewish knowledge. For example, if you're going to be singing songs, print out copies of the lyrics, and include transliteration and translations of Hebrew songs.

### Fostering social connections

When designing activities, think about building in opportunities for families to connect with one another, such as a collaborative volunteer project or a communal meal. Pamela Welner, director of admissions at Brandeis Marin, shared, "We have noticed that many families are attending more than one event. The feedback is that the events are thoughtful, engaging, friendly and fun for the entire family. Not only do families come back for more than one event, they are bringing their friends with them."

The idea of creating community-building opportunities for non-enrolled families can seem overwhelming and maybe outside of the school's mission. After all, day schools can feel stretched to even provide community-building opportunities for their currently enrolled families. This long-term investment must be weighed against short-term staffing capacity. Consider trying something small but which your target audience would really appreciate. While large events can bring in a lot of families, in the long run, what's most important is building relationships and showcasing your school.

TIKVAH WIENER

# If You Build It, Get Them to Come: Marketing a New School

WHENEVER I THINK ABOUT STARTING ON A NEW—POTENTIALLY EXCITING BUT ALSO POSSIBLY TERRIFYING—JOURNEY, I THINK OF AVRAHAM AVINU, OUR PATRIARCH ABRAHAM. HE IS CALLED BY GOD AND LEAVES HIS BIRTHPLACE, WITH THE TORAH EMPHASIZING THAT HE PARTS FROM THE MANY ASPECTS OF LIFE THAT MOST PEOPLE PRIZE: FAMILIAR FAMILY AND FRIENDS, A COMMUNITY WHERE HE IS KNOWN, A HOMELAND THAT MIGHT BE DEAR AND PRECIOUS. OR I CONSIDER RUTH, “AMONG THE ALIEN CORN,” AS KEATS PUTS IT, SOMEONE WHO HAS CHOSEN TO BE A MIGRANT, A FOREIGNER, BECAUSE SHE FEELS CALLED TO SOMETHING BEYOND HERSELF, SOMETHING SHE PERHAPS DOESN'T QUITE UNDERSTAND BUT SOMEHOW KNOWS IS RIGHT. WHAT I MOST ADMIRE ABOUT ABRAHAM AND RUTH IS THEIR CERTITUDE AND THE DISPATCH WITH WHICH THEY CARRIED OUT THEIR PLANS. MOST OF US STRUGGLE WITH UNCERTAINTY, DOUBT, FEAR AND INSECURITY WHEN EMBARKING ON A NEW PATH, PARTICULARLY WHEN IT SEEMS SCARILY INNOVATIVE AND RISKY.

Building a new school definitely falls into the category of risky and alarming, and the path to starting The Idea School, the interdisciplinary, project-based learning Jewish high school I'm opening in September, has been no different. When you consider that the school's model hasn't yet been done in the Jewish world, you might ask: What made you embark on this seemingly crazy path? And just to be clear: Since the school hasn't even opened yet, we're really still in the process of leaving our native land, but I want to share some highlights from the journey, in the hopes of making the change process transparent and perhaps less frightening to those who might be considering innovations in their schools.

## STEP ONE: HEED THE CALL

About seven years ago, I saw a video about the High Tech high schools in San Diego. They're public charter schools that use interdisciplinary, project-based learning and were founded by Larry Rosenstock, a carpenter-lawyer turned educator who doesn't believe in tracking, since he “doesn't want to mispredict what kids can or cannot do.” When I saw the video, it truly felt like God was calling me—I know it sounds sappy, but it's true—and even though I tried to resist the call for a long time, eventually time made it evident that this was what I was meant to be doing.

## STEP TWO: BUT DO YOUR HOMEWORK

It took me six years from the time I first saw the video to the moment when I announced I was opening The Idea School, which will be at the Kaplen JCC on the Palisades in Tenafly, New Jersey. In that time, I not only had to develop expertise in project-based learning (PBL), I also had to learn how to open and manage a nonprofit. In that time, I

- implemented PBL in the institutions I was in
- visited the High Tech schools numerous times
- took like-minded educators there
- made Larry Rosenstock a mentor (I really gave him no choice, and lucky for me, he loves to advise colleagues who share his educational goals)
- enrolled in High Tech High's Educational Leadership Academy program for a year
- visited schools and institutions that practiced project-based learning and its close sibling, design thinking, and
- delved into the literature and research about the pedagogy.

I also began finding and training Jewish educators in PBL and formed the I.D.E.A. Schools Network, now The Idea School Institute. In the four years my partner Dr. Eliezer Jones

and I have been at this work, the Network has trained over 1,000 educators. Running our PBL conference, the Summer Sandbox, on the East and West Coasts enabled us to get a sense of which educators and schools were interested in educational innovation and how we could partner with them to amplify their and our work.

Receiving a grant from the Joshua Venture Group (now Upstart), an organization that seeds Jewish social entrepreneurs, enabled me to gain the experience in nonprofit management that I needed and connected me to a network of Jewish innovators who were interested in impacting the Jewish community in 21st-century ways. The grant gave me the confidence, knowhow and community I needed to embark on the journey of starting a new school.

### STEP THREE: ESTABLISH THE NEED

If God isn't literally whispering navigation directions, as God did with Abraham, how do you know if your innovation is right for you and your institution?

I live in Bergen County, New Jersey, and one of the signals that it was time to open the school was the talk I began hearing about the lack of seats in the neighborhood high schools. The local federation gave me the demographics for our catchment area, and it turns out the "anecdotal" was borne out by actual statistics: The community was growing, and eighth graders were going to need more choices.

### STEP FOUR: BUILD YOUR CASE

Making the argument for The Idea School has been one of the most crucial parts of starting the school. Luckily, around the time I started working at Magen David Yeshivah High School in 2014, the *Jewish Standard* asked me to be in their cycle of op-ed writers, and it was there that I moved from speaking to educators on my blog about educational innovation to educating a much larger audience about it.

That led to many conversations over Shabbat meals and in the aisles of supermarkets about the host of reasons kids might be disengaged from learning: because their learning styles and abilities don't match with traditional education; because they don't find relevance, meaning or joy in particular subjects or disciplines; because a generation raised on technology and the autonomy it generates needs to be taught differently; and the world we live in also requires a new way of learning.

I was happy to have any and all of these conversations, and when the documentary *Most Likely to Succeed*, a film that's about why education needs to change and that highlights the High Tech Schools, reached the market, I showed it often in various neighborhoods, including my own. In fact, parlor meetings for The Idea School have sometimes consisted of a viewing of the film with a Q and A after. Having become connected to Gary Jacobs, the funder who started the High Tech Schools, I was even lucky enough to have him host one of the post-film discussions and appear at a parlor meeting.

The more research I did and the more teachers I trained, the more I felt comfortable giving answers not only about why a new high school in Bergen County was needed, but about why it should be an interdisciplinary, project-based one.

### STEP FIVE: EXPECT MANY CHALLENGES AND OBSTACLES

One of the reasons I love PBL so much is that it prepares students for the real world by giving them the emotional tools and stamina to deal with challenges and problems that are part of daily life. When school is about studying for tests, it becomes a marathon of memorization and a competitive game where s/he with the highest test score wins. We all see the high levels of stress and anxiety our kids are under, starting at younger and younger ages. PBL, as we know, focuses on assessments and growth in learning, and exercises kids' resilience muscles by showing them that learning is about trying new things and making mistakes, and achievement is not only about reaching goals but about tackling the obstacles in the way of them.

Opening the school has been a great lesson in internalizing these PBL lessons and an opportunity to *deeply* practice what I preach. One of the biggest obstacles I faced during the school's first admission season was that the school lacked a location. The journey to finding one was long and often arduous. Persisting through the uncertainty of not knowing where the school would be at a time when parents and students needed that information was very difficult. And it wasn't just parents and students who deserved that information. "Where will the school be?" was the first question *anyone* asked about the school. I wanted to talk about the exciting model the school was bringing to Jewish education, but everyone else wanted to discuss where we would be.

### STEP SIX: HAVE FAITH BECAUSE ...

When I was up late riddled with uncertainty, doubt, fear and insecurity, I remembered Ruth and Abraham, and that gave me the strength to continue. I would wake in the morning, read another article that continued to build my knowledge base, work on curriculum and continue to reach out to contacts about location. When one of my board members told me, "You need to call any and every place in Bergen County that's zoned for a school," I thought, *Well, I emailed the JCC awhile ago. Maybe I'll try again.*

It turns out, that was the right thing to do. By the time we reached out to the JCC a second time, the leadership team there had heard of our school and what we were trying to accomplish. Our educational vision matched their organizational one, and we were able to make a match that excited both of us.

In fact, being at a JCC has opened up possibilities for The Idea School that we only could have dreamed of. The JCC in Tenafly has an acclaimed music school; an art studio; gardens run by GrowTorah, a Jewish farming organization; a gym with numerous classes; a pool, track and tennis courts, and more. There are programs for adult seniors and people with special needs in the building, as well as a Reggio Emilia-based pre-school and a Hebrew learning program. The facility also abuts a state park, so connecting with nature, one of the school's goals, will be easy. Being in an established facility also means that we won't be taxing the community with another building, and so the location also has become a way for us to stay true to our institutional goal of being financially sustainable and sound.

## WHAT IS THE VALUE OF JEWISH DAY SCHOOL?

RABBI JON KELSEN

DEAN, YESHIVAT CHOVEVEI TORAH

What is the advantage of the day school model over that of the public or private secular school supplemented by (even excellent) Hebrew school? In a phrase: culture.

A day school, as an immersive educational environment, can be a world. Unlike Hebrew schools, with their relatively limited hours and scope, day schools can enact robust cultures, constituted of shared values and practices. In this world, each curricular and extracurricular component may be contextualized vis-à-vis all other components, the sum of which is greater than its parts.

All this is true of any immersive educational environment. What distinguishes day schools is the particular values and practices, the great things (à la Parker Palmer) situated at their center. Ideally, for day schools, those are Torah and mitzvot. By initiating cohorts of students into Torah and mitzvot, a day school helps cultivate the humanity of its students, to borrow a phrase from Martha Nussbaum (cf. the teaching of Reish Lakish, Sanhedrin 99b: “Whoever teaches the child of another person, it is as if he made him”). It can mold types of people, educated Jews, whose metanarrative is Torah, and whose values, dispositions and behaviors, as expressed in all aspects of their lives, are primarily informed by this discourse.

DR. ORA HORN PROUSER

EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT, ACADEMY FOR JEWISH RELIGION

I write as a Jewish educator, as a parent whose children attended day schools and as a day school alumna. I write as a biblicist whose love of Bible began in my day school years. I have seen the value of this education for myself personally, for my children and for students who attend the rabbinical school that I lead. I see that there are subjects learned, skills developed and ideas sown in serious Jewish education in childhood and adolescence that are not easily replicated in other settings or later in life.

Attending day school sends the message to students that their Jewish knowledge is important enough to demand a significant amount of time and effort. It makes the point that their family and community value their Jewish education. It emphasizes that they, too, should see this as an essential, not an additional, part of their development.

Attending a day school allows students to live Jewish culture and the Jewish calendar, and to understand that these should be seen as essential and vital parts of one’s life and experience.

Attending a day school enables students to experience the immersive nature of the Hebrew language. Hebrew opens the door to everything in Jewish life, academically, culturally and interpersonally. Learning and living Hebrew enables one to experience everything else in Jewish life on a deeper, more satisfying and more joyful level.

Finally, to those who think that attending day schools limits social ties, let me just say that this year, in honor of the fortieth anniversary of our high school graduation, four of the members of our graduating class had dinner together (more than 25% of our class). I cherish lifelong friendships made in my day school years.



In short, when my board and I partnered with the JCC, we felt like we had won the lottery, and in retrospect, it seemed like the path to the school’s location had been leading all along to Tenafly. What we learned from the search to find the right place is that persistence and faith are key.

### STEP SEVEN: ... YOU'RE NOT ALONE

It might seem as if embarking on a new path is work you do alone, but looking back at each step of the process, you can see that that wasn’t the case. When I first saw the video about High Tech High, I was at a school where I had started a PBL program, and one of my students told me, “You should start a high school.” I remember saying, “No. No, I can’t do that.” But even then, the seed of the idea was planted, and at the same time I was saying “no” and thinking “that’s crazy,” I was also thinking, *Hmm. What if?* And when I think back on that day, I remember being in a room surrounded by students who were recognizing the value and importance of what we were doing educationally. In fact, a parent of one of those students reached out as soon as he heard we were opening the school, asking us how he could help, joining the board, attending our many events and making us institutionally sound.

I started the I.D.E.A. Schools Network, the professional development arm of The Idea School and now called The Idea Institute, with a partner who has become a close friend, and the Network connected me with other educators and Jewish innovators passionate about changing education and communities and “woke” to the reasons why we need to do so.

Our various parlor meetings yielded additional board members and ambassadors from the community who have become staunch supporters. Gathering parental advocates is crucial to the success of any new initiative we try in our schools, and I



don't think we spend enough time explaining to our parents the *why* behind the changes we're making and showing them the benefits of those innovations. This is definitely an area our schools and institutions need to focus on more as we grow and develop.

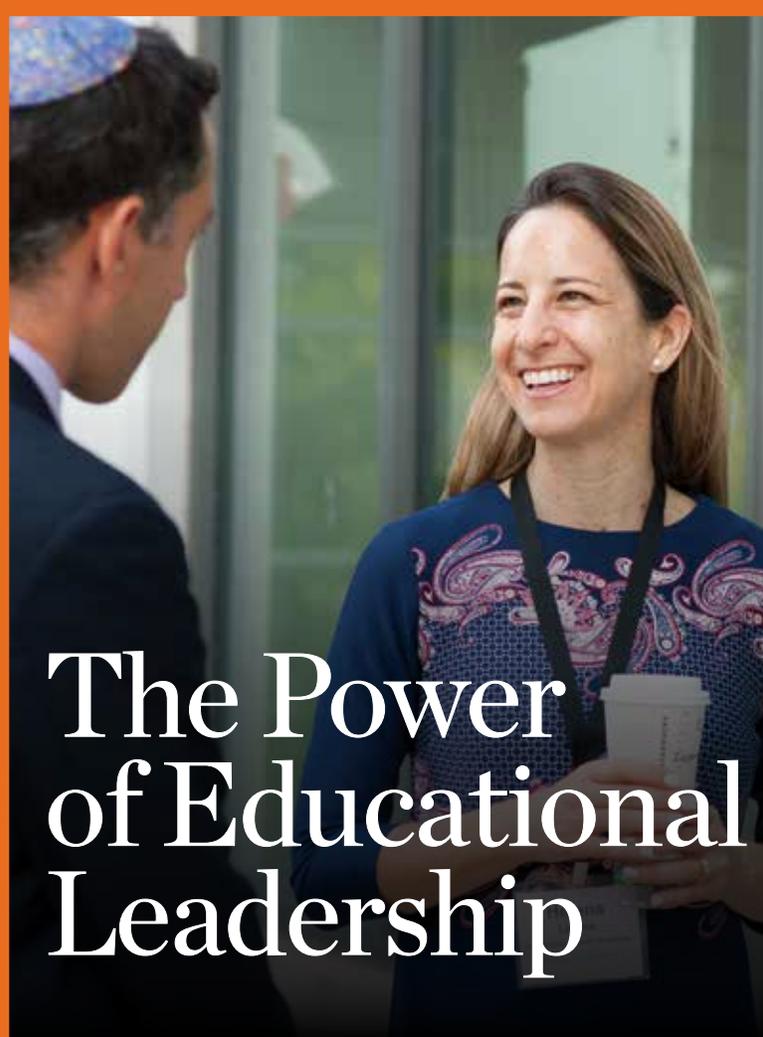
And of course, The Idea School is no longer simply an idea: We have an inaugural grade of students and are honored that they and their parents are joining us.

### COMING FULL CIRCLE

Abraham and Ruth possessed a faith that led them to a whole new life and place. I started by saying they were alone, called by God to a new life and purpose. The change journey may feel lonely, but as I discovered, it leads you to realize that in truth we're never alone. Abraham was accompanied by his wife and helpmeet, Sarah, and a relative, Lot. (Lot later became an obstacle, true, but at least he was willing to give Abraham's new life a try.) Ruth, of course, famously cleaved to her mother-in-law Naomi, making sure that Naomi didn't travel her road in solitude and in turn finding a community and founding a dynasty that made the Moabite woman's choice a matter of national fame and pride.

I wrote this article not to make light of the obstacles we face as we embark on innovation in our schools. The hurdles and problems that arise are real, complex, thorny and often dispiriting and depressing. There are a thousand and one reasons never to get started on new initiatives or to drop them when they get complicated.

But I hope you persist. It's worth it, and we all have the tools to succeed. And if or when you falter and feel alone, just email me. I'd be glad to help.



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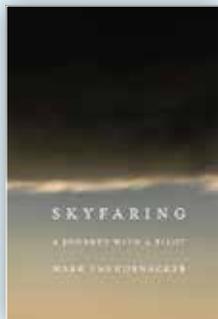
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# ON MY NIGHTSTAND

BRIEF REVIEWS OF BOOKS THAT PRIZMAH STAFF ARE READING



## *Skyfaring: A Journey with a Pilot*

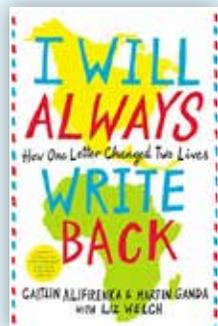
by Mark Vanhoenacker

Commercial airline travel is a mundane experience. You wake up today in New York, and it is wholly unremarkable that in just a few hours you can be on the other side of the world. In fact for most, the most remarkable aspect of the flight experience is how unpleasant it is. With intrusive security screening, constant delays and a general “me first” attitude from

fellow passengers, the experience of flying today isn't any more pleasant than taking an intercity bus.

In *Skyfaring*, Mark Vanhoenacker describes the experience of piloting the Boeing 747 around the world, explaining the technical and logistical aspects of modern travel. But this is more than just a chronicle of a day-in-the-life or a collection of interesting anecdotes. Vanhoenacker's prose is almost spiritual, and his captivating stories help the reader to experience the magic of flight through his eyes. *Skyfaring* restores our sense of wonder in an activity that has become for many routine and disenchanted.

**Daniel Infeld**



## *I Will Always Write Back*

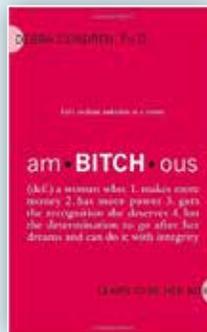
by Martin Ganda, Caitlin Alifrenka and Liz Welch

Recently when visiting the Solomon Schechter Day School of Bergen County, I was intrigued by a bulletin board display in the middle school that spoke about how the students were inspired by this book. It tells the true story of how a pen-pal relationship that began as a school assignment ultimately changed the students' lives. Through their six-year corre-

spondence, Martin and Caitlin develop a strong friendship despite the incredibly different lives they lead. Martin lives in one of the poorest areas of Zimbabwe, in one room that he shares with his mother, father, three siblings and another family. Caitlin begins to realize how privileged she is to be growing up in a middle-class family in the United States. Education, which is a given in her world, is a privilege in Zimbabwe. When Martin, a top student, can no longer afford the fees to attend school, Caitlin sends him \$20 from her babysitting money, which is enough money for his school and to feed his family for two weeks.

The book speaks to the juxtaposition of the lives of two adolescents who by circumstance have very different opportunities. It showcases the growth and empathy of Caitlin as she begins to recognize how fortunate she is, but rather than taking this for granted, she works to better the life of her friend. To me, however, the most important message of the book is the demonstration of how one individual can truly change someone else's life. As Caitlin shared when speaking about the book, “One small act of kindness, you have no idea how powerful that can be, whose lives it can change, including your own.”

**Elissa Maier**



## *am.BITCH.ous*

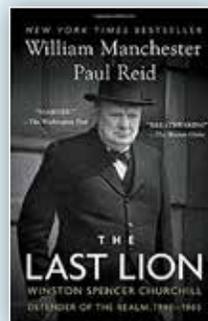
by Debra Condren

Women have succeeded greatly in the 21st century, but gender differences are still very visible in their domestic and professional lives. They are still expected to behave like “good girls” in everything they do. Times are changing. Women are contributing more than their share but are not getting equal attention and recognition. Women have to be “am-bitch-ous” to get what they deserve.

Condren emphasizes that women need to take themselves very seriously during their careers and lives. She encourages women to feel that they are the “real deal,” fully capable of pursuing careers while at the same time enjoying life. She offers dos and don'ts for women to succeed in their goals. She provides useful tools to help overcome fears in the professional world. She dares them to be great, and I agree with her, since God has given everyone a beautiful brain to utilize.

Having a career you enjoy will also benefit you psychologically. Women need the power, recognition and money to fuel their determination to pursue meaningful, challenging work performed with integrity.

**Prableen Kaur**



## *The Last Lion: Winston Spencer Churchill 1874-1965*

by William Manchester (and Paul Reid)

This trilogy of books about the life and activities of Winston Churchill, occupying significant real estate at 800-plus pages per volume, provides rich and inspiring chronicles of the leadership, weaknesses and strengths of one of the most charismatic and courageous leaders the world has ever seen.

As I peruse stories about the majestic leadership and legendary eccentricities of this remarkable person, I find myself wondering, page after page, about what circumstances were necessary to exist for such a dynamic person to have existed and what needed to be true for him to thrive. Churchill's early years in Victorian Britain are just as inspiring as his years in the national spotlight. While this box set is not a casual read, and the lengthy descriptions of early 20th century global politics are somniferous, I am often amazed by how many times the world as we know it came to the brink of disaster only to be saved by the force, will, energy and desire of one remarkable human.

Reading these tremendous books will leave you with a sense of majesty, humility and wonder for where the world has been, and hopefully a sense of imagination for where we may be heading.

**Yechiel Shaffer**



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