

Education

A JEWISH EDUCATION

BY ROBERT SUSSMAN



WHAT JEWISH PARENT DOES NOT WISH THAT he could step into a shul and open a siddur or chumash to the right place and be able to follow along with the davening (prayers) or the leining (reading from the Torah scroll) in the service – and who does not wish this same thing for his children as well? Whether or not a child will ever choose to set foot in a shul or to open such books when he grows up is something we cannot foresee.

The bottom line is that mitzvah observance is a choice¹ – without a doubt, the most important choice that we make in our lives – and Jewish education, regardless of the age to which it is geared, has to be about helping people to make an informed choice. The mission of a Jewish day school must be to give Jewish children the basic and fundamental

tools and skills of literacy that they will need to access their heritage – to receive the Torah that has been given to them and to enable them to transmit it on to the next generation.

Here are two more common fallacies that prevent parents from considering a Jewish education for their children:

Fallacy #3: I WILL HAVE TO INCREASE MY LEVEL OF OBSERVANCE IF MY CHILD ATTENDS A JEWISH DAY SCHOOL

The fact is that a child who attends a Jewish day school may ask his parent to do things that the parent might otherwise not do: eg, have a Seder on Pesach; build a sukkah for Sukkos, etc. Children connect much more easily with the many mitzvos and customs than adults do, and tend to get downright excited by them. What child doesn't

enthusiastically look forward to attending a Pesach Seder and sharing with everyone in attendance the many things that he learned at school about Pesach?

Children who attend a Jewish day school may even schlep their parents to shul on Shabbos because they consider it a fun and exciting place to be – and a place that their friends will be as well. Some parents will choose to encourage their child's enthusiasm for such things... others will not. How you choose to respond to such requests will provide the biggest lesson of all for your own children regarding what you want them to consider important and what you want them to get excited about.

It is also important to distinguish between increasing your personal level of observance and being sensitive to that of

$E=mc^2$ $16 \times 5 = ?$ $8 - 2 = 6$ $14 \times 2 = 28$

others. For example, a more common and practical issue that may come up is being prepared (eg, having a supply of kosher snacks and foodstuffs on hand) for when school children from more observant homes come to play or visit with your children.



Morah Noa Sussman
making a Pesach Seder
with Grade 1 students

Fallacy #4: JEWISH EDUCATION RESULTS IN PRODUCING A RELIGIOUS CHILD, OR, G-D FORBID, A RABBI OR REBBETZIN

Although it may be a bit alarming to consider, the biggest influence on a child is: his parents. Children learn their values primarily from those that were embraced and modelled by their parents.² In short, children tend to value what their parents value, and tend to measure things against the measuring stick that was passed onto them by their parents. Children whose parents are not interested in observing the Torah will, with very rare exception, grow up to be adults who are not interested in observing the Torah.

Moreover, just as with secular studies, Torah can be studied, and is studied, on a range of levels. The mere ability to open up Jewish texts, follow along inside, read and translate them – in other words, basic literacy – cannot be compared to the level of study of someone who has received smicha (ie, rabbinic ordination). Prior to even beginning studying for smicha (which itself can take a year or more), rabbinic students typically spend five to seven years of intensive (read: 10 – 12 hours per day) university level and post-university level Talmud study, which enables them to delve into complex, detailed, and nuanced discus-

sions (found within books that most Jews have never even heard of) and ultimately come to authoritative decisions regarding questions in halacha (Jewish law).

Just as a student who takes the basic science and math classes given throughout an ordinary primary and prep school education does not have the skills or knowledge comparable to a doctor – so too, a student who receives a proper Jewish education focused on literacy does not have the skills or knowledge comparable to a rabbi. And the comparison is fitting in terms of any concern that a parent might have that his child will actually become a rabbi – as how many children who love their science classes are dedicated enough to make the necessary sacrifices to put in the time and study necessary to become a doctor? Although every Jew is obligated to study the Torah – daily³ – that doesn't mean every Jew will eventually become a rabbi. In fact, it is quite evident that few do. **■**

¹See Devarim 30:15-20.

²See e.g., We Are What We See: The Family Conditions for Modeling Values for Children, David Popenoe, PhD (<http://parenthood.library.wisc.edu/Popenoe/Popenoe-Modeling.html>).

³Rambam Hilchos Talmud Torah 1:8

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From left to right: Rivkah,
Eliana, Robert, and Chana
Michla Sussman at
Generation Sinai at UJDS