



Education

$5 \times 2 = 12$

$1 + 3 = ?$

$4 + 1 = ?$

$5 \times 2 = 10$

# THE PEOPLE OF THE BOOK...

SHOULD BE ABLE TO READ IT

BY ROBERT SUSSMAN, HEAD OF JUDAIC STUDIES,  
UMHLANGA JEWISH DAY SCHOOL



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

**J**EWISH EDUCATION TOO OFTEN TAKES THE FORM of, on the one hand, an education in the habitual (almost robotic) performance of mitzvot, and on the other hand, a socialisation towards certain acceptable behaviours, attitudes, dress, and norms, of which only some have an actual basis in Torah and halacha (Jewish law). The purpose of any education, however, should be to instil in the pupil a love of learning in and of itself – for its own sake. And more than that, the recognition that learning can happen at any time and in any place – and should continue throughout a person's entire life.

What does a Jewish child need to know? As a new Jewish school, this was the question that served as the starting point of our consideration of what should go into our curriculum. Note that the question was not: what does a child from an observant Jewish home need to know? Nor was the question: what does a child from an unobservant Jewish home need to know? For centuries, Jewish children, regardless of

their religious affiliations or varying levels of home observance, sat learning side-by-side in chedarim and other such settings.

Our goal was simple: keep the children together at all costs – not one level and one subject for these children and another level and another subject for those children. Accordingly, the emphasis at Umhlanga Jewish Day School is on Jewish literacy. Put simply: The People of the Book... should be able to read it (and understand it)!

There are numerous fallacies that hold people back from giving their children a Jewish education. I would like to discuss some of the ones that I regularly encounter:

## Fallacy #1: RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IS LITTLE MORE THAN INDOCTRINATION<sup>1</sup>

By the time a child who receives a traditional Jewish education based on studying Torah texts reaches high school, he has reached an impressive level of study, having spent years studying from original source texts, as well as their many commentaries, in their original

and various foreign languages (ie, not translations) – including Biblical Hebrew, Mishnaic Hebrew, Modern Hebrew, Aramaic, etc. Moreover, the primary thrust of a traditional Jewish education is textual analysis – learning to define terms precisely, dissect incidents, quote verses, statements and arguments by considering such things as their logic, context, evidence, authority, or other underlying support. Students are trained to get down to the very heart of disputes – recognising precisely the point(s) of contention between opposing positions and understanding in what cases such a difference of opinion would practically matter to the way that we actually do things. Oftentimes, one authority is merely explaining, or perhaps adding to the statement of another authority – so students must also learn to consider whether an argument is even taking place at all! And, these reading comprehension skills do not remain the exclusive property of the children's Jewish studies' classes, but influence how they read and process everything with which they come in contact thereafter.

Moreover, indoctrination has no place within Judaism and Jewish education, and the emphasis, in fact, is just the opposite: questioning and seeking sources/support for ideas and opinions. One of the most common phrases in the Talmud is: From where do we know (that such-and-such is the case)? In other words, children are trained to constantly ask what the source is for an opinion or idea.

## Fallacy #2: THE EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES THAT I WANT FOR MY CHILD (EG, SPORTS) ARE NOT OFFERED AT YOUR SCHOOL<sup>2</sup>

There is no such a thing as a perfect school.

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

And like every decision we make in life, there are always trade-offs. Largely due to their size, the average Jewish day school simply cannot offer the variety and quality of extra-curricular activities offered at larger non-Jewish public and private schools.

In this case, the choice largely comes down to priorities. Although a child may enjoy or excel in a particular area, should that mean a decision such as what school the child should attend should be primarily determined by his proclivity for that particular activity (especially if an after-school activity will suffice)? The odds of a child who does not attend a Jewish day school marrying another Jew becomes almost as bad as the flip of a coin. Moreover, there is a clear correlation between the amount of Jewish education that a person receives and the chances that he will later intermarry: "Marriage to a non-Jew is rare among those who attended a Jewish day school or yeshiva, more common among those who attended a part-time programme that met more than once a week, and higher still among those who attended one-day-a-week programmes. In short, the more intensive the Jewish schooling, the lower the rate of intermarriage, reflecting both the types of people who obtain more intensive Jewish schooling, and quite possibly, the direct impact of Jewish education on later marital decisions."<sup>3</sup>

A child may be talented at art or really enjoy playing soccer. At the end of the day, is it worth gambling with his future – and the future of his children? The children in a house-

hold where both spouses are Jewish have close to a 100% chance that they will be raised Jewish – compared to only one-third of the children from homes where one of the spouses is not Jewish.<sup>4</sup> Don't we owe everyone who came before us better odds than the flip of a coin that our descendants will remain Jewish?

The Torah is our heritage and our inheritance, but to truly appreciate it and acquire it takes significant effort, investment, and ongoing education. If we fail to give our children an educational foundation that will enable them to access even the most basic and fundamental of Jewish texts, and that will, as a natural result, enable them to feel at home in Jewish places, then what sort of Jewish future can we honestly expect for them? **IL**

<sup>1</sup>We opened our doors on 16 January 2012. Our students currently range from Grade 000 (age 3 years old) to Grade 7 (and, please G d, we'll be adding Grade 8 in 2014).

<sup>2</sup>The National Jewish Population Survey 2000-01 – Strength, Challenge, and Diversity in the American Jewish Population (Updated 2004), page 18. ([http://www.jewishfederations.org/local\\_includes/downloads/4606.pdf](http://www.jewishfederations.org/local_includes/downloads/4606.pdf))

<sup>3</sup>Id.

<sup>4</sup>Id.

more on  
JL DIGITAL  
EDITION

**WILL YOU HAVE TO BECOME  
RELIGIOUS IF YOU SEND YOUR  
CHILD TO A JEWISH SCHOOL?  
WILL YOUR KID END UP, G-D  
FORBID, A RABBI!**



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