A Parent’s Perspective

by Linda Kamras

Thirty years ago when we decided to leave our New York home to settle in Sacramento, California, our families were devastated. We were leaving the Jewish Mecca and would be living with our young children in an unknown environment and uncharted Jewish territory. We would not have the benefit of an East Coast community to insure a Jewish infrastructure in which our three toddlers could flourish. It could be argued that those fears and concerns were based in reality. There was no kosher butcher, one Conservative synagogue and one Reform congregation, and the afternoon Hebrew school was the extent of Jewish education in town.

But we saw a very different set of circumstances. We recognized the opportunity to become part of an existing, growing Jewish community. This West Coast suburb was eager and ready to expand its Jewish identity by providing greater Jewish education to foster a love for and an understanding of the heritage with which we have been entrusted. The trends of assimilation and intermarriage were gathering momentum, concern for which led to support the concept of a Jewish community day school. It would not be an easy accomplishment, but avoiding the task before us was not an option. Today, our Jewish community day school, known as Shalom School, goes from 3 months of age through grade 6 with an enrollment of over 250 students. I have the benefit of hindsight to reflect on the success of my children, but more importantly the extraordinary value of day school education.

Parenting is not an exact science and has few definitive guidelines, yet it is the most profound and complex responsibility. The fact remains that we can only measure our own sense of performance and accountability by the way our children mature into young adults. Therefore, it is essential to seek or create choices that will assist us in providing the kind of environment that will lead to desired goals. Those of us who are Jewish parents must see the education of our children in terms of harmoniously bridging the gap between two worlds and two cultures. Our children must find meaning and relevance in their Jewish heritage to guide them to become active participants in the civic and cultural life of our nation.

I am often asked what truly differentiates our day school from well established private or high achieving public schools. The answer is not so much about the specifics of curricula and after-school activities or varied sports programs. It is not that we offer a demanding dual program intended to challenge the mind and body or that we emphasize how hard work is essential for self-satisfaction and goal-oriented aspirations. The big difference is that our program teaches students the Jewish view of life and personal accomplishments. They are keenly aware that Judaism insists on meaningful action in both the religious and secular worlds; that doing and giving is more essential to our value system than feeling and getting.

Students understand that we are all born in the image of Hashem and that each of us has an intrinsic and unique value to be respected. They learn that the quality of our character is of far greater import than the quantity of our assets. They learn that behavior has consequences and that placing blame is only a way to avoid accountability. The laws of kashrut and Shabbat mitigate reckless self-indulgence and illustrate what daily personal sacrifice and commitment mean. It sanctifies one day a week when the family can come together to escape and deflect the frenetic schedules of the past six days. Our students understand that it is not what we preach, but rather the way we use our time and resources that are the real indicators of our value system.

Within their classrooms they are taught that an accepting attitude toward differences in people and style are important elements in the establishment of world peace and prosperity. Shalom graduates are encouraged to follow a passion and to know that the fulfillment of dreams involves the courage to fail, the perseverance to begin anew and the humility to succeed. We challenge these students to be the best ambassadors in the community by their behavior and tikkun olam projects, to be the messengers of truth about Judaism and to educate those who espouse baseless, ignorant bias.

To parents who are hesitant about day school education, I can with some degree of certainty assure you that this experience will not transform children into religious, observant zealots or insulate them from the world in which we live. Quite the contrary! It will teach a child to think, question and challenge. It will enlighten a child about this heritage that has sustained us through centuries of victimization so we will be victims no more. They will learn that Judaism is more than a religion, a people, and a land, but that it is a way of life that has standards for interaction with others and a commitment to respond to suffering and injustice in the world. And they will learn that our heritage encourages us
to forgive, not forget, so that revenge and anger do not dictate our behavior and that history does not repeat itself.

It will give a child the knowledge to make informed, well-considered choices with respect to their Judaism in the 21st century. Knowledge is power, and Jewish knowledge earns respect within the larger community. Today more than ever before, modernity has introduced a mechanism that has made life impersonal and has homogenized us to a series of numbers and icons. This creates a state of anonymity that can erode human dignity and one’s sense of responsibility to a cause greater than oneself. The longer we can surround our children with nurturing human interaction, in an environment where they can ask those difficult questions, the stronger their value system and self-confidence take root.

I would like to conclude with a letter I received from my son when he was a junior at college because it so eloquently speaks to the subject of Jewish education.

*Over the past semester I have been pretty lax in participating in the Jewish community on campus. I haven’t been to services in months. But tonight I decided to go to Hillel for dinner with some friends. After benching the Birkat Hamazon, which I instinctively knew from my years at Shalom School, it was suggested that we go see the movie Shindler’s List. So we crammed into a car and drove off to Market Fair Mall on Route 1 just outside of campus much like we would any other night. This evening, however, the conversation was a bit different. We all wondered what we would feel after seeing what many critics were calling the Holocaust film. I had no idea how I would react.*

*Oddly enough, I left the theater that evening with a disturbing sense of fulfillment. I wasn’t as upset or overly angry or disheartened as I thought I should be. In fact, I felt a bit happy. I was pleased not only because I was a member of a unique group of people which had survived Nazi Germany, but more importantly because I had been taught by example and through formal education how to be an active participant in that group. I was happy that my father had taught me Kiddush, that my mother lit candles for Shabbat and all the chags, that my grandfather taught me how to daven and that Shalom School taught me how to read, write, and speak Hebrew. I was happy because my parents, my entire family gave me the necessary education with which to be an active Jew.*

*In no way did their educating me guarantee that I would participate or practice my Judaism. As I said, I haven’t been to services in months. But when I did go, I was not a stranger to my own customs. I called home that night to thank my parents for using me as a guinea pig in those early years at Shalom School, for dropping me off at Camp Arazim, for taking me to all the USY events and for sending me to Israel on various programs. Had I left the theater that night not knowing how to say the Birkat, not knowing how to write my name in Hebrew, or not knowing at least where I could look to learn, I would have been disheartened, for then six million of my ancestors would have died in vain.*