

A Teacher's Teacher (May 2006)

It was ten years ago this summer. The building was in a profound state of transition. What is now the lobby (and what was then the demolished bathrooms) was blocked off by sheets of plywood. Dust and debris covered the walls as well as the floors. The only place we could meet was the old library (now our primary preschool classroom; the one with the sink). And into this scene of complete disarray came a vision of order. With her giant piece of cardstock and numerous handouts, our prospective educator put on a memorable display of professional show-and-tell. (It had something to do with a mock archeological dig she had orchestrated at her previous job in Pearl River.)

But what Iris Schwartz did that day was more than interview for our Religious School Principal job. She came to teach. To be sure, we were all duly impressed with her level of preparation, with the design and comprehensiveness of her presentation. Yet more than anything else, it was Iris' enthusiasm, her passion for teaching that was so intoxicating for us. (And this, I might add, included her now-trademark impulsive laugh.) I knew we were lucky to have found Iris. Extraordinary educators are so very hard to come by. But I had no idea just how fortunate we were.

Ten years later, the Religious School has doubled in size, it has become the most compelling characteristic of our congregation, and it is all due to one woman. Of course Iris will most likely dismiss this; she might even challenge it. But I want to be perfectly clear: the success of our synagogue, the verve that permeates our corridors, is as much owing to the devotion and love Iris has brought here as much as anything and anyone else. From that Ellis Island Day orchestrated by Iris last year, to the monthly family education programs, to our annual mitzvah project (ranging from park clean-up to doll manufacturing), to our Artist-in-Residence program, to Ten Minutes of Torah—Iris has transformed this place into a bastion of Jewish educational creativity. Iris has brought both national and local recognition to our synagogue for the remarkable programs she has imagined. She has deservedly earned a passionate loyalty from the teachers who have served with her, including a decade's worth of madrichim (many of whom will continue to teach Judaism throughout their adult lives). Above all, Iris has implanted a breadth of knowledge and love for being Jewish in our children. (And to all of this I would be remiss if I did not add Iris' God-given talent of finding the best deals for anything that can be bought for cash.)

Iris has never asked for much, at least when it comes to herself. She asks for recognition for her faculty, she challenges us to mirror her love for Judaism with our children. But now, after ten

years of teaching us about the mitzvah of “V’shinantam l’vanekha—You shall teach them diligently to your children,” it is time (long overdue) to affirm and publicly thank Iris Schwartz for all she has done for us.

Please be with us on Friday night, May 5 as we honor our teachers, especially our teachers’ Teacher. From Iris have we gained strength; now let us join together in asking for God’s blessing that she go from strength to strength.