

TI's Innovative Approach to Jewish Education - Stan Dorn

Jennifer Lav had mixed feelings when she first sent her son to the Himmelfarb School. She wanted Ira to get a strong Jewish education. But “traditionally, Hebrew school wasn’t fun. It was something you had to go to.”

She was astonished to find that Ira “absolutely loves Sunday school”. Now six years old, Ira “looks forward to it every week, and when he gets home, he’s excited to tell me what he did.” After just two years, “it’s installed a love of Jewish learning. He’s sad when Hebrew school breaks for the summer.”

Volunteering at Tifereth Israel’s Himmelfarb school, Jennifer discovered the school’s secret sauce: it’s “a diverse and accepting place that meets kids where they are as they learn in very different ways.”

Under the approach pioneered by the school’s director, **Rabbi Kelley Gludd**, most class cohorts are not defined by age or grade level. Instead, each student



picks a club where Jewish learning is integrated with the child’s favorite activities. As Rabbi Kelley explained, “we support student agency, encouraging children to have as much say in their educational journey as possible.” This promotes learning that is “hands-on, experiential, and filled with energy and joy.”

The school teaches familiar subjects: Shabbat, holidays, Hebrew, Jewish values, Biblical literacy, Israel, prayer, preparation for Bar, Bat, and Kabbalat Mitzvah, etc. But learning methods are anything but tra-

ditional.

Rising sixth-grader **Ava Strollo** explained, “we’re all focused on one topic, but we learn it in different ways.” For example, during the Shabbat unit, students in Ava’s reading and writing group “wrote short stories, using what we researched about Shabbat.” In the Music Room, students rewrote the lyrics of popular songs to bring out their favorite parts of Shabbat. And during a unit on the book of Genesis, students in the Builder Space used Legos to picture key moments drawn from a close reading of the Biblical text.

According to Ava, “being able to choose how you learn” lets students “be more creative in our classes. We get to do what we really want to do. We listen more, we’re more productive.”

Ava’s 13-year-old sister, **Mia**, put it succinctly: “School is a lot more fun.”

Hebrew instruction is especially individualized. Over Zoom, Hebrew teachers meet with students one-on-one, using instructional methods carefully tailored to fit the individual child’s situation, knowledge base, and learning style.

Fresh from her recent Bat Mitzvah celebration, Mia explained why she found the one-one-one Hebrew instruction remarkably effective: “Everyone learns at their own pace. Each student can learn as fast as they can, but without speeding anyone along. We learn everything better and more thoroughly.”

Some activities are community-wide. Students and teachers all come together for weekly prayer. Usually, seventh-graders lead the upbeat, tuneful service, though younger students often volunteer to lead.

Holidays are another time when the entire school community comes together. This Spring’s celebrations included a Tu B’Shevat ice cream seder, “Nailed It! Passover Edition,” and a Purim carnival.

The school is built on a “pedagogy of joy,” according to Rabbi Kelley. “Joy comes when our children are engaged by learning, have a degree of independence and agency, and feel safe to explore concepts and ideas without fear of judgment.” In Ava’s words, “It’s a very good community to be learning. No one’s going to judge you if you’re not always right. It’s about learning, not about knowing everything.”

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Michelle Strollo, Ava and Mia's mother, was struck by the school's trusting environment that helps older kids feel comfortable sharing their thoughts about tough topics, including rising antisemitism in area schools. "That's a great gift we can give our kids," Michelle explained, "providing safe spaces where they can be proud of their Jewish identity and cultivate that together."

Michelle noted the contrast with weekday schooling: "After sitting in classrooms all week, it's nice for kids to have a place where learning happens so naturally, not in a traditional, formulaic way," She stressed that the school gives students "a chance to get creative,"

providing a break from secular schools that focus on standardized test results by "teaching to the test."

"In the past, my kids would go because they're good kids. But on lots of Sundays we heard them ask, 'Do we have to go?' Now, it doesn't matter how late our girls stayed up on Saturday night. They wake up on Sunday and want to go to religious school," drawn by "renewed energy and a sense of community."

Rabbi Kelley provided a long-term context for the school's innovative approach: "When learners feel contentment, belonging, and joy within Judaism, we reinforce the foundations of our Jewish future."