

...Teach them thoroughly to your children...

— Deuteronomy 6:5-9

...Teach your children well...

— Crosby, Stills, and Nash

WHETHER YOU PREFER the words of the *Sh'ma*, or those of Crosby, Stills, and Nash, there is nothing quite like educating your own children. The phrase "*v'shinantam l'vanecha*" took on an entirely new meaning for us nine years ago when our children (eight, six, and three) stopped compulsory schooling and joined us at home to learn. Now the parents of five children, we continue to homeschool despite being in an area with excellent Jewish schools of all types.

Even an excellent school leads children to learn for external motivations. Learning at our house takes place without sticker charts or incentives to promote the type of learning that we want to see.\* Rather, we each pursue what we are personally interested in. Dani, who is eight years old, is on a paper airplane kick, and we encourage him to read everything he can about paper folding, airplanes, air travel, aerodynamics, etc. He keeps a log of planes he's made and is able to compare and remember them. While he's at it, I am mentally checking off reading, writing, math, and the ability to follow sequential steps. At 15, Anna spends a day a week volunteering at a therapeutic horse farm, honing her gift of nurturing animals and helping children. Although our children pursue their own interests, we do set learning standards for them. By pursuing interest-based learning, we are valuing the child while giving them breathing room to achieve those standards.

Besides "you must have endless patience" (I don't, ask my children), one of the most common reactions I get about homeschooling is, "How do you know what to teach?" I always wonder how the questioner knew what to do with a baby. Despite all the available books, there is nothing like actually becoming a parent. When your child reaches school age you don't suddenly stop knowing how to approach them. At age five, a child needs to spend the day playing and baking and taking nature walks and absorbing lots of good stories, and that will change by six and certainly by seven. There isn't a school curriculum in

the world that can gauge those changes better than a mom or dad.

As in all aspects of child rearing, when educating our children, we look to the experts — other experienced parents. Isn't it amazing how a mother with a baby two months older can seem like such a pro? It's the same way in our homeschooling world, only the months have stretched into years. Now that I have a daughter applying to college, I routinely check in with other families that have sent their children to college, and parents of children who are middle school age check in with me to think about the high school years.

Looking back on the past nine years, we realize that homeschooling has provided us with so many things. First, we appreciate our model of integrating our learning with our lives. I used to be on the lookout for a Jewish school that had an integrated Jewish and secular curriculum past kindergarten or first grade. It was nice to take the *parshiot* in Genesis and turn them into complete lessons (arithmetic in *Noach*, *hakhnasat orchim* — welcoming guests — and table manners in *Vayera*, etc.), but that never seemed to carry on for very long. Second, we make different learning opportunities complementary and integrative. Recently, I began learning *Sefer Daniel* with my two sons. Each day, we read, discuss, and research one chapter. The next day, we write the previous day's story in our own words, and jot down some Hebrew vocabulary words. Some days beg illustrations, others don't. In this way, we work on Torah learning, writing skills (including penmanship and spelling), research tactics, map reading, etc., all within one "subject."

Despite the name "home" schooling, plenty of what we do doesn't actually take place at home. On a given day, we might visit the art museum, suddenly inspired to find biblical themes in art, or the zoo, sketching animals in the rainforest. We are also fortunate to be part of an active homeschooling cooperative. Besides music lessons, our children (in various permutations) have *chevrusas*, learning partnerships, and are part of a fencing club, and a homeschooler's literature class. They learn chess from a chess master, and study skepticism, sculpture, and philosophy — all from teachers other than my husband or

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myself. The best learning opportunity of all in homeschooling, though, is for the adults. That is the opportunity to learn to trust one's

children, and to learn to be available as a guide and resource as we watch them learning *l'shema* — for the sake of learning itself.



\* For more on learning without rewards, see Alfie Kohn, *Punished by Rewards*. Of course, this idea is contra-Rambam (*Perek Helek*), something I've decided to live with.

## School Choices

Jason and Devora Kimelman-Block

“HOW COULD A RABBI choose to send his daughter to a non-Jewish preschool?” asked the principal of a Jewish preschool. The question rang in our ears and continues to bounce around our heads with colors of defensiveness, pride, and a touch of sadness. After narrowing our choices to schools that were affordable and conveniently located, we found ourselves pondering the proper balance between an environment that was “like home” and an encounter with different surroundings that supplement her home experience.

While a Jewish preschool would reinforce lessons we teach Esther at home — the importance of Shabbat, saying a *brakhah* before eating, eating kosher food — we were unable to find one that offered Hebrew immersion. And some values that are not exclusively Jewish might be better reinforced at non-Jewish schools.

Our interest in a particular preschool came from a question on its application: “How much time on average does your child spend... watching TV or videos, playing computer games? We ask that you consider your child’s media intake in light of the increasing evidence of its adverse effects on child development. Are you willing to change your child’s media intake if your teacher feels it would benefit your child?” We were impressed. It was not a question we had seen on any other application. At one Jewish preschool, the children occasionally watched videos *in school*.

We like the idea of unstructured downtime and relatively relaxed “uptime.” Most preschools seem to be selling themselves on their academic programming. On Mondays they have music, on Tuesdays, science, on Wednesdays... etc. For us, academics in preschool are *not* a selling point. In fact, we are planning only one after-school class (Hebrew) and reserving the rest of the week for unstructured play. Whatever happened to a time when children would just play? Sure, when they grow up they need to be competitive,

but so much intellectual, social, and physical development derives from playtime.

We learned about Esther’s school’s educational philosophy, which emphasizes the imagination, on a site visit. The classrooms have a good supply of basic materials such as driftwood, pine cones, and fabric that can become whatever the children imagine. The school’s philosophy stresses that too much technology diminishes imagination. Instead of battery-operated toys that pop and whistle, toys are better animated by children’s own voices (and pops and whistles). How do we develop the next generation of inventors if our children spend so much time “playing” with programmed technology rather than playing and thinking creatively?

We decided that, for now, rather than have Esther attend a Jewish preschool and learn (a little) Hebrew, watch (some) videos, and be in a highly programmed/scheduled school environment, she will attend a different school that focuses on technology-free imagination-building playtime. There are other ways to teach Esther Hebrew and reinforce the Jewish experiences and values we teach at home, but in this overly programmed world we’d better give her imagination a strong foundation. We hope to build on that foundation by sending her to a Jewish school after kindergarten where she will receive plenty of structured academic programming.

All choices require compromise and a degree of loss. One solution to our current dilemma: *aliyah*, and finding a Hebrew immersion school with an educational philosophy that we can support.

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