

Volume 1 | 5776 - 5777

THURSDAY THOUGHTS

by Rabbi Ari Leubitz

ONE AJA CONNECTION TORAH ISRAEL HISTORY SHABBAT
KESHER ACADEMIC VISION
INSPIRED NACHAS
21ST CENTURY ACTIVE LEARNING
FAMILY ISRAEL ADVOCACY
COMMUNITY CONNECT
EMPATHY TEFILLAH
REFLECTION CLIMATE & CULTURE
MITZVOT MIDDOT
ERETZ YISRAEL
EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION
JEWISH JOURNEY
HEBREW AND JUDAICS TALMUD



Rabbi Ari Leubitz



Dear AJA Community,

One of my favorite parts of the week, as I prepare for Shabbat, is to share my Thursday Thoughts with you.

Some weeks have been light and humorous, others have been more detailed and intense, focusing on the growth and changes at AJA. Regardless of the topic, it has been an important way for me to connect with you, and for you to connect with me. I've been grateful for your feedback and questions... I always love answering the "why"!

We created this compilation of the Thursday Thoughts from this school year, and hope you enjoy reading them as much as I enjoyed writing them.

L'shalom,

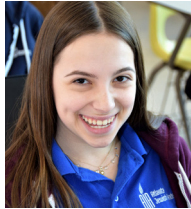
A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a stylized 'A' followed by several horizontal strokes.

Rabbi Ari Leubitz
Head of School
Atlanta Jewish Academy



Atlanta Jewish Academy

SHALOM



Imagine...



August 11, 2016

7 Av 5776

Dear AJA Community,

Can you imagine...?

Being excited about the future

Being inspired by the depth and breadth of our staff

Being the top Atlanta Jewish Day School

No need to imagine -- it's time to **Reimagine AJA**.

At AJA there is an energy in the air as we get ready for the school year as a partner in each child's Jewish journey.

In the same way that we will watch the growth and changes in the children, we are delighted to share with you some significant changes at AJA. My vision, as we **Reimagine AJA**, is to continue positioning ourselves as a highly competitive college preparatory Jewish Day School that is fiscally responsible to our board and families, while offering an outstanding progressive education for all our students.

To achieve this, changes are underway! From renovations to new construction, hiring talented faculty on both campuses, and announcing the addition of three accomplished staff members whose focus will be to assist in bringing the vision to fruition.

It is with great excitement that I introduce to you:

In Operations: Mark Dingmann / CFO-COO

Mark will be focused on the operations and business side of the school. Mark brings an extensive business and financial background to the AJA family, and was the perfect choice for this role. His charge is to Reimagine Operations, and to drive efficiency from a fiscal perspective, leading to a positive impact on how we allocate each and every dollar. Mark will insure that all of our school resources are aligned properly, so that we are accountable, as an academic center and as a business, to meet our vision. It's imperative that we add extra focus to the operations and fiscal piece of the puzzle.

In Marketing: Barrie Cohn / Director of Marketing and Communications

As we began to Reimagine AJA, we needed a dedicated resource to launch us on the path to be the most recognizable day school brand". We are focused on working to bring our families a clear, concise, dependable communications policy focusing on all things AJA. We recognize that we live / work in a fast-paced, pressure filled world, so it is a priority for us that we remain mindful of your time. Our goal is to share with you in the most efficient way all the exciting things at AJA! Barrie will be creating an overarching communications / marketing plan as well as a new and improved website as we work to Reimagine AJA.

In Admissions: Erica Gal / Director of Admissions

Along with these changes in Operations and Marketing, came the need to Reimagine Admissions. Erica's role will be to continue placing AJA's roots far, wide and deep into the greater Atlanta community, as well as nationally. She will be the face of admissions, nurturing connections with current and encouraging new families to join us. Erica's passion and enthusiasm for Jewish education, as well as her personal experiences as an AJA parent, provides an authentic perspective to prospective families. She will provide an extension of the AJA brand - genuine, welcoming, nurturing, inclusive and approachable.

We are energized by all the changes, I ask you to come and see for yourself. Our doors and emails are always open. An important piece of our vision is to keep the communication flowing and open, so we want to hear from you.

The countdown to school begins. We cannot wait to see the children soon as we **Reimagine AJA!**

L'shalom.

AJA - Our Climate and Culture.



August 18, 2016

14 Av 5776

Dear AJA Community,

It has been such an energizing week at both the Raymond Drive and Northland Drive campuses. Yesterday was the first official day of classes at the Upper School. We welcomed one of our **largest** freshman classes as well as several new AJA families to the school. At the Northland Campus, parents have been meeting with teachers for Intake conferences and grade level meetings, and we hope to see the Lower School parents and students this Sunday at “Catch a Glimpse” from 10:00 am - 12:00 pm.

I embrace the idea of all parents coming to school with their children to meet the teachers, see the changes happening and to actively engage in the start of the school year. This concept of **actively engaging** in a child’s education and their Jewish experience is one that none of us should take lightly. Studies have shown that there is a clear connection between student achievement and parental involvement. Having a connection to the school is important to all of us under this roof, and, most importantly - essential to each child’s success and growth here. Dare I say it takes a village?

An important component of the climate and culture here at AJA is that our doors are always open to you. And, it’s a priority to me that I continue to share my vision and goals for the school with you. I will be connecting with you on this Thursday email, and we’ll continue the dialogue via our weekly school emails, website and social media communication.

As we **Reimagine AJA** and the climate here, I want to take a step back and articulate some of the core values we will continue to impart to the children while they are here under our roof.

1. **Build interpersonal relationships.** We encourage the children to connect with new and old friends, connect with their teachers and connect with their siblings and families. This leads to their overall enjoyment of the school and of learning. Fostering relationships helps create a comfortable and inclusive environment for all of us, both at home and at school.
2. **Kavod. - Respect. Respect. Respect.** This is a key piece of our school climate and our Jewish roots. The Talmud ordains a profound respect which children owe to their parents. We carry this over into the goals for the school. We want all children and staff here to feel respected. And, for the children to bring the kavod back to their homes...that is a goal for us as well.
3. **Assume the best in each other.** We are teaching the children in all grades the importance of looking for the good in one another. It’s too easy to hone in on the issues and negatives. We encourage a positive approach. This links the new relationships they are building with the kavod they will demonstrate to one another.

These core values, and a family’s acceptance of them will contribute to the culture and climate of AJA. Think of the climate in the school like a temperature and the culture in our school as the thermostat. We will continuously adjust the thermostat as needed to make sure the temperature is the right one for the children.

As always, my door is wide open for you. Please set up a time to meet me if you haven’t already. I want to get to know all of you personally. That is truly one of my priorities. I know many of you are joining us on Sunday, August 28th at the L’Chaim event. This will be a wonderful way for the AJA community to connect outside of the walls of the school. I look forward to seeing you then, and Florence and I are excited for this warm (speaking of temperature!) Southern welcome.

L’shalom.

Toda Rabah.



August 26, 2016

22 Av 5776

Dear AJA Community,

Last week we talked about my vision concerning the culture and climate of the school, so in light of that I wanted to start a conversation about my educational vision for the school. This flows directly from the school's mission that we *embody the ideals of community, fostering love of Torah, individual development, and educational innovation*. The goal at AJA is to curate an innovative academic experience to engage our students today and equip them to solve the problems of the future. Welcome to 21st Century Learning! Together, innovation and tradition help shape our students into lifelong learners who take risks and safely develop their Jewish identity.

Reimagine Learning

To connect with children in 2016 and beyond, we must recognize that the children today learn differently than we did when we were young. It's imperative that we keep that top of mind and adjust the way we educate them accordingly. As a school that will be focused on a 21st Century Educational program, AJA supports the education core of creating the best learning experience for our students, breaking down the walls of a typical classroom and opening the world to each student.

Mishlei (Proverbs) 22:6 tells us to: "Educate a child according to her/his way," which as we see it, means the need to individualize and reimagine the learning experience for our students.

We will focus on developing each child's individual learning skills including:

- Creativity, use of new technology and innovation
- Critical thinking and problem solving
- Communication
- Collaboration

Why are we doing this?

I'm glad you asked. We are re-designing Jewish education for the new century and placing the active "learner" at the core of our thinking and practice. In Judaism we have always been taught to ask "*why?*" (which is, by the way, my favorite question in the world). We want to encourage our children to ask questions, to wonder why and to learn that the questions at times are more valuable than having the correct answers. Children who can generate their own questions, blaze a trail to their own learning. This gives them the power to create pathways toward being lifelong learners.

Over the next month, together with the Educational Leadership Team, I will share more specific answers to the "*how?*" we are moving toward 21st Century Learning. In the meantime, I encourage you to ask me "*why?*" anytime, it really is my favorite question.

Here is a great opportunity to learn more about how you can help give children access to a 21st Century Learning experience with a scholarship from the ALEF Fund. Now is the time to contribute, as the deadline is September 30th.

As a side note, my family and I will be at Young Israel of Toco Hills for Shabbat. If you are in the neighborhood, please come by so I can personally wish you and your family a Shabbat Shalom.

L'shalom.

Religious Vision for AJA / Part 1.



September 2, 2016

29 Av 5776

Dear AJA Community,

Last week, I shared Part 1 of my **vision** on the Educational component at AJA. I appreciate all the great feedback and “*why*’s” I received from many of you. (They made this Rabbi very happy!) This week, I want to share Part 1 of my **vision** on the Religious component at AJA and the “*why*”.

Here at AJA, we are on a religious mission. We are a school that proudly believes in Torah and mitzvot. We affirm that the teaching and learning of Torah and Ivrit (modern Hebrew) are the foundations for our children. We are a school that serves the newborn through the High School graduate, and we educate all students regardless of their learning profile. We are a co-educational, modern Orthodox school that proudly serves the entire Atlanta Jewish community, regardless of religious practice, demographic, or socioeconomic privilege. We don't shy away from diversity - we embrace it.

Because we embrace diversity, we encourage our children (and parents!) to question the reasons *why* for all the components of our Jewish Journey. We want to nurture curiosity and address doubts. Our openness to a dialog/discussion/clarification of values is ever-present under this roof. I believe that we need a religious culture at AJA that is open to engage and discuss, reimagine, and always wonder - you guessed it - *why*?

One question that has been raised to me is “*why* do we need a kashrut policy?” Kashrut observance is an important component of the religious vision for AJA. Kashrut is a crucial piece of our educational mission - which connects our students with our heritage in the most basic way. And, as we embrace diversity and inclusion, I want to extend that to students and families who observe kashrut. By creating a kashrut policy at all school events, and by requesting you observe the laws of kashrut at events outside of the school where our students are participating, this will celebrate what unifies us versus focusing on our differences. This hopefully has addressed the “*why*” for kashrut, you can see the “*what*” in this kashrut explanation I developed.

I appreciate that some of you have questioned this policy. And, believe it or not, I appreciate that some of you are reading this and still not agreeing. For certain things in life, I believe that we just need to agree to disagree. At times, that is the best or only solution. Think of our AJA family being like your own family. In our families, we may each approach things from different points of view as related to political or social or religious issues, but at the end of the day, we care enough about each other to embrace our differences and move forward as a family. The Talmud is all about questions and a debate of the Mishna/laws. The process of Torah learning is driven through questions. We must ask and debate and wonder, in order to learn. Permission to question is a core value in Judaism.

L'shalom.

My Jewish Journey.



September 9, 2016

6 Elul 5776

Dear AJA Community,

During my first month here in Atlanta and at AJA, I have shared with you pieces of my academic and religious vision for the school. I wanted to step back for a moment and simply say thank you. I've received the most supportive and welcoming messages from many of you. It is overwhelming - reflecting on the number of calls, personal meeting requests and emails. When I looked at the group who welcomed Florence and me at the recent L'Chaim event, I was particularly moved by the diversity in the room. People from all areas of the community came together to support the school as we move forward together in our journey to **Reimagine AJA**. The success of this school is inextricably connected to the future of Jewish Life in Atlanta, and I am so proud and humbled to take on this responsibility. In addition to the AJA community, I extend a special thank you to the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta for their generosity in support of my leadership role at the school. Additionally, to those of you who attended Back to School Night last night at the Northland Campus and those who will attend the Upper School Curriculum Night tonight, thanks for being present so I could share more of my vision for 21st Century Learning with you.

It occurred to me that while we are focusing on the Jewish Journey for the children, I haven't shared with you my own personal Jewish Journey. I haven't answered the (wait for it...) "*why*" I became a Rabbi and "*why*" I decided to head down this path. So, here goes. You may want to get comfortable, it's not a short answer.

I was raised by an Orthodox mother and Conservative father in Cleveland, Ohio, where the options for school were either Orthodox or Public. There was nothing in between. Attending the Hebrew Academy of Cleveland gave me a foundation that I cherish to this day. I felt such a connection to Judaism, but still wasn't sure where my place was. I suppose, in hindsight, that I have always questioned the "*why*", even starting from childhood. After my gap year in Israel, I felt a pull to answer my own "*why*". I knew I was moving down a path to find my Jewish Identity, and wanted to know what that exactly would look like.

When I moved to Riverdale, NY with Florence, the Orthodox community was like nothing I'd seen. It was fused with a spirituality and love of music which, as a son of a *chazzan*, truly resonated with me. This community was open to questions. They were inclusive to all levels of religious commitment. I felt the the history, tradition and love of Torah, Mitzvot and Ivrit, and it was intertwined with the intellectual piece I was also drawn to. This was my home. This was the answer to my personal "*why*".

I found myself more involved in the shul, studying and teaching. It was my decision to switch to the 12 am - 8 am shift at the call center I managed so that I could spend every morning at the Yeshiva after minyan. I'd study there all day, head home to say a quick hello to my new bride, rest for the blink of an eye, and repeat. It was frenetic. Looking back now, I have no idea how I maintained that pace. Clearly something was fueling me. It was my passion and connection to Judaism.

As part of this journey, my beautiful wife helped pave the way for the type of Rabbi I'd one day choose to be. I was in the midst of the most complicated topics in my studies, when she asked me the most simple question... "*Ari, what are you learning?*" It sounds basic, but, I couldn't answer it simply. At that moment, I made myself a promise. This pact was to always ask myself what the spiritual meaning and message was in anything I learn or teach. This realization empowered me to personally **reimagine** how my own learning would take place. I ask this of myself, of my children, and of the children here at AJA. I believe that we must all ask and answer the "*why*" in every area of our daily lives.

Hopefully, this has given you a glimpse into my personal journey, and one of the reasons for my inquisitive nature. This background has served to develop my Jewish educational vision. It is my belief that our vision has to start with our precious students. They must understand "*why*" everything we teach and practice is meaningful and relevant, and to learn not just what they are doing, but to wonder "*why*" it's important. We want them to grasp "*why*" Judaism is relevant to help them grow as human beings, citizens, and as Jews in their service to G-d and family.

May we all continue to ask the "*why's*" in our personal and communal lives, so that we can foster deeper, richer and more meaningful connections to our families and each other.

L'shalom.

From the Heart.



September 16, 2016

13 Elul 5776

Dear AJA Community,

As you know, I've addressed the concept of agreeing to disagree. Along those lines, my topic today is something I know we will all agree on. We all want what is best for the children of this school. Am I right? We're 100% in agreement? As parents, families, educators and Jews, our goals for our children include: to provide an excellent general and Judaic education, so our children will have the opportunity to attend the colleges of their choice, and to raise literate and proud Jews who will grow to be the exceptional adults we know they can be. Are we still on the same page? Great.

What if I told you that you could help the children in our community achieve these goals instantly?

What if I told you that you could help promote the core values of AJA instantly?

What if I told you that this would be at NO COST to you, and you could even make money in some cases?

(I have a feeling your response would be... "sign me up!")

As you all know, I'm new to Georgia and I'm absolutely astounded at the free money that the State of Georgia has made available for private schools. It's called the ALEF Fund. For those of you unclear about how it works, let me tell you what I have learned.

You contribute to the ALEF Fund and it results in free money to AJA for scholarships to children who couldn't otherwise afford tuition. Any Georgia taxpayer can participate, designating AJA as the recipient, in exchange for a tax credit on their state income taxes. That designated amount becomes a scholarship for a student to attend AJA. You are basically redirecting your Georgia tax liability to support an AJA education.

I've learned that if you speak from the heart, words will be received by other people's hearts.

From my heart, I humbly ask you - I implore you - register now for the ALEF Fund. Also from my heart, I profusely thank those of you (listed below) who have already registered.

I am requesting 100% participation from our AJA Community.

In my eyes, the only reasons we wouldn't reach that level are:

1- Procrastination. The Talmud tells us to: "sell your wares while the sand is still on your feet" i.e. there's no time like the present. Let's just agree to take procrastination off the table as an excuse.

2- Confusion. Perhaps you're not clear about how the ALEF Fund works. That is reasonable. However, we have answers to help you understand how simple this process is. Click [here](#) to read more, or email me or Sheli Feldman with any questions. I'm always happy to answer the how and "why".

Let's partner and get this done. Contributions from the ALEF Fund will continue to make a significant impact on the number of students who can benefit from a Jewish education here at AJA. How can you NOT participate?

If this plea isn't resonating with you, maybe this will? The overall goal from the AJA Community, faculty and parents is \$1.1 million. If/when we hit that number, the word on the street is that there will be an AJA Community party with a dunk tank to "Dunk The Head Of School".

Between helping the children and dunking me in a dunk tank...I see this as a no brainer. Agreed?

From the heart, please register today and make a difference for children in our community.

L'shalom.



Religious Vision - Part 2.



September 22, 2016

22 Elul 5776

Dear AJA Community,

This past Shabbat, I had the privilege of spending time with our Upper School students at their annual Shabbaton. I was beyond moved by the experience, seeing how these young adults are truly immersed in the AJA Jewish Experience, that it led me to share Part 2 of my Religious Vision.

The AJA Jewish Experience is one that is unparalleled in the Atlanta Jewish Community. It is infused with a sense of pride, love of Judaism and her people, and profound authentic learning; all in the context of being prepared to attend the most elite colleges and universities. Let me show you a glimpse into the AJA Jewish Experience and the journey we offer our students.

One begins the AJA Jewish Experience with our **Early Childhood (ECD)** program. This is a place where our littlest ones - while experiencing the love and laughter of an early childhood program - are age-appropriately immersed in Hebrew language and Jewish concepts. Additionally, at this early stage in their Jewish Journey, our children are introduced to Jewish values, integrated with experiential learning. We bring the AJA Jewish Experience to the children through the sights, smells and sounds of Judaism. The AJA Jewish Experience is one that is unparalleled in the Atlanta Jewish Community.

After ECD, the children continue to the **Lower School**. There our children engage with Judaic text in a deep and rigorous way. The foundation we create for our students with our Ivrit b'ivrit program makes the AJA Jewish Experience one of a kind. The children will do a deep dive into middot (character building) and empathy, have a weekly Oneg Shabbat (pre Shabbat programming) which connects them with their peers and older students. Where else can Jewish students encounter teachers who model love of Judaism and too are immersed in Jewish life? As I mentioned in Part 1 of my Religious Vision, I believe that it is critical for all Jewish children - regardless of practice - to experience an authentic, immersive and profound Jewish Experience. The AJA Jewish Experience is one that is unparalleled in the Atlanta Jewish Community.

The next stop on the AJA Jewish Experience is our **Middle School**. There our students are learning to take their text skills to the next level. As young as sixth grade, they begin to research and write D'verei Torah (as you can see on the links to the right of this letter, and on our blog). They learn how to navigate clashing values and are asked to engage with religious nuance and tension. The Ahavat Yisrael (the love of Israel) is palpable in our school - in the hallways and in the classrooms. AJA has invested in a special staff of Shlichim (messengers) from Israel who bring our love for Israel to life here at the school with teachings, music and incredible ruach (spirit). Finally, we are a school which allows and actually encourages students to ask the Jewish and religious "why" questions? The AJA Jewish Experience is one that is unparalleled in the Atlanta Jewish Community.

The AJA Jewish Experience continues at our **Upper School**, where students this past Shabbat, planned an ENTIRE Shabbaton from beginning to end. This demonstrated incredible leadership and organization, bringing the AJA Jewish Experience right to their classmates. Our juniors and seniors led all aspects of davening and organized and taught intellectually rich and thought provoking Torah classes. Friday night our students danced and sang until they quite simply had nothing left. As Shabbat was drawing to a close, you could see, that from putting so much of themselves into the weekend, the fatigue had finally kicked in. After a Shabbat nap, they organized a talent show that illustrated the diversity and uniqueness of these dynamic individuals. It was an incredible ending to this very special weekend. Did I happen to mention that the AJA Jewish Experience is one that is unparalleled in the Atlanta Jewish Community?

Religious Vision - Part 2.

In closing, I wanted to share a story, that goes to the heart of what it means to travel through the AJA Jewish Experience. As you know, most of our graduates choose to follow their graduation year with a Gap Year in Israel, to harness their AJA experience and fully immerse themselves in Israeli life and culture. This past month, one of our Shlichim took it upon himself to locate a host family for each one of our 18 students who went to Israel for their Gap Year. I didn't even know this was happening! This incredible gesture will insure that each of our students has a family to guide them and create a more meaningful connection for them while in Israel. The AJA Jewish Experience is one that is unparalleled in the Atlanta Jewish Community.

This demonstrates how **the AJA Jewish Experience goes far beyond our infant - 12th grade program and beyond our school!** The connection our children have with these families in Israel, the number of families our students will encounter in Israel, the connection that our students have to the Jewish Landscape in Atlanta and beyond...that is all part of the AJA Jewish Experience.

The future leaders of our Jewish community, our Federation, our local AIPAC, our Hillels - it all starts here. It's the AJA Jewish Experience. That is why I am so passionate about our school. Because I believe that the success of AJA and our mission is bigger than just AJA, it's about the success of the Atlanta Jewish Community and the success of Atlanta Jewry at large.

Starting as infants, our children are on a path. This path will eventually lead to something deep and profound. I also know that there are multiple entry points in Judaism. I witnessed that firsthand at the Shabbaton. Some students were immersed in Torah study. Others were in their element while leading a service or study group. There were some who were joyfully singing and dancing. I saw some students quietly interacting and just absorbing the spirit of the weekend and being with friends with whom they shared *middot* (character traits) and values. This resonated with me. It was a different Shabbaton experience for each of the students, and they each found their own personal connection. My job as an educator is to promote a culture of loving Judaism, and to provide many entry points for our children so they can each hit their stride on the path to leading meaningful, introspective and authentic Jewish lives.

Thank you, to the students of the Upper School for creating a ritually-infused Shabbaton, and for allowing your classmates (and this very impressed Rabbi) to absorb the beauty of Shabbat in their own way, on their own paths

L'shalom.

AJA AI Chet.



October 13, 2016
11 Tishrei 5777

Dear AJA Community,

I am hopeful that you and your families had an easy and meaningful fast. Reflecting on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, they were particularly special for me, as these were the first holidays here in Atlanta for the Leubitz Five. We shared holiday meals and davened with our new Atlanta and AJA community, and it was special and different and beautiful. Even though we were in a new place, it became clear to me that an amazing thing about Judaism, is that certain words and songs and blessings - whether in a home or in shul - can instantly transport you to a familiar place, regardless of where you are. When I heard the first notes of Kol Nidre on Tuesday night, I was instantly transported to the most comfortable and contented place. My heart was full and I soaked in all the beauty and awe of the holiday.

On Yom Kippur day, when we began the AI Chet (on account of this sin), I was very reflective - as many of us are. As we were reciting the 44 statements which bring us to the heart of the mistakes we've made over the year, I recalled that it is actually an alphabetical acrostic. The lines begin with the sequence of alef-bet. I'll bet you are wondering "why"? It's in that order, because this served as a memory aid back in ancient days before we had a printed siddurim (prayer book). When I was reminded of this, here was my train of thought (please, bear with me for a minute).

AI Chet > alef-bet > ABC's > educating our children > AJA

I started thinking that we could have an AI Chet for AJA, focusing not on mistakes or sins, but the opportunities for growth.

Let's imagine an AJA AI Chet...



AJA Al Chet.

In our community, we can be better at:

- Highlighting our areas of growth opportunities to the right people who can help us grow and change.
- Being patient with our children, and with children around us who perhaps need extra focus or attention. Remembering that the success of our children is inextricably linked to the success of the class as a whole.
- Understanding that we are all growing - even as an institution.
- Inviting others to our Shabbat tables, not only the people already part of our own inner circles, but those who are not.
- Showing up. Being present. Engaging with our children. Learning with them. They want and need to know that we are listening.
- Demonstrating to the children the respect it shows to arrive early vs. late to events. Getting them to school on time, and not detracting from instruction time.
- Speaking positively about other schools and shuls, highlighting what they are doing “right”, even if it is not how we do it at our school or shul.
- Embracing the diversity in our community and allowing it to unite us instead of divide us.
- Serving as ambassadors for AJA, spreading the word of the great education and community we offer here.
- Having faith in the process, and in the educators who are working with our children every day.
- Engaging in conversations with and around our children that are rich in middot (character).
- Letting the Head of School know you are reading his emails.
- Asking our children specific positive questions about how they demonstrated middot, and not “Interviewing for Pain”.
- Attending school and community events with our children to demonstrate to them the importance of involvement.
- Showing appreciation to our hard-working PTSA, by volunteering with them and registering for the wonderful events they organize.
- Following the “who to contact” protocol at the school, starting with the teacher before elevating any questions or concerns.
- Identifying what is really on our minds, not complaining about the peripheral issues, and having the patience to let the problem resolution occur.
- Taking the extra minute to say “thank you” to the people in our personal and professional lives who are making an impact on us and on our children.
- Encouraging our children to look around them, and see those classmates or peers who are alone - and work hard to include them.
- Committing to not judge a book by its cover. Digging deep, getting to know a person and understanding who they really are before creating a label for them or judging their level of Judaism.
- Unplugging. Limiting screen time for adults and children and making time to be *Panim El Panim* פנים-אל-פנים (face to face).

For all these, G-d of pardon, pardon us, forgive us, atone for us.
ועל כלם אלו-ה סליחות, סלח לנו, מחל לנו, כפר לנו.

This may seem like a lot to consider. But...here's the good news. Even though Yom Kippur has ended, we have more time to make these important changes. The sages teach that while the gates seem to close at the end of Neilah and the sound of the shofar seals them for another year, the gates don't actually close until the end of Sukkot. If you have more to add, I encourage you to send them to me. I would love to hear your Al Chet for AJA or for your own family.

L'shalom.



Reimagine Sukkot at AJA.

October 20, 2016

18 Tishrei 5777

Dear AJA Community,

Chag Sameach! I hope you are all enjoying the holiday with your friends and families. At AJA, we started this short week with a lot of activity on both campuses. Yesterday, the Hallel Davening at the Lower School started the day for our students, and it was incredible. All the Lower School children gathered in the Auditorium and davened together - *Lulavim and Etrogim* were shared with all of the students by some of our Middle Schoolers. It was a lively tefillah filled with prayer and song. After Davening, they had a chance to see the "Sukkah Museum" filled with the most creative model Sukkahs that the students built based on *Mishnah* and laws. It was a pretty impressive display. Our Shlichim put together fun Sukkot stations surrounding the theme of *Ushpezin* (Sukkah guests). Lunch this week for all the students has been in our school Sukkah, and it is a joy to see our students all under one roof enjoying their meals and spending time together in the Sukkah.

Also this week, our Upper School students gathered to start their annual Maccabiah / Color War in celebration of Sukkot. The two teams have been participating in outdoor and indoor sports, activities, leadership, learning, art, dance and music. They are expressing their creativity and *ruach* (spirit) through their spirited attention to the games and one another. Everyone has a chance to shine as part of their team, working together across all grade levels as they connect over their common purpose. The Maccabiah will culminate at the Northland Campus for pre-Simchat Torah dancing on Friday. At that time, we will finally have all of our students here under one roof. (I can't wait!) And, this is the day that I think about when I continue to **Reimagine AJA**. Sharing all things AJA, as one connected community on one incredible campus.

As we continue to Reimagine, we are taking a closer look at all areas of the school that impact teaching and learning. In particular, assessment is one of many areas that we are currently reimagining. Special thanks to the hard work of Debbie Bornstein, Diane Marks, Franeen Sarif, Leah Summers and John Wilson.

As we Reimagine testing at AJA, we were charged to reevaluate whether or not the ERB assessment is the most effective option for our students. **After careful consideration, we have concluded to postpone the November ERB administration.** We are researching alternative solutions and all the details can be found here. This is but one of the improvements and changes we are making as part of the Reimagine process. Please let us know if you have any questions.

L'shalom.



The Past, Present and Future...



October 27, 2016

25 Tishrei 5777

Dear AJA Community,

There is such a fascinating dynamic and tension in Judaism. It kept popping up in my head over various times during the *Chaggim*. In shul, I was thinking about the meaning of each holiday, how for much of the month we are so connected to G-d and so deeply immersed in *Tefillah*. It occurred to me, specifically on Shemini Atzeret, that we'd all be going "back to normal" as soon as the *Chaggim* came to a close. It was a beautiful month of connection with G-d, reflecting on the beauty of this past year, thinking about my hopes for the future and now (ah, reality) I had to reenter the present. It is the push and pull - literally a tension - between the past, present and future we all feel, in all aspects of our lives. We are situated here in the present, but all feel a constant pull from the past and constant push toward the future. Tension, you know, is not always a bad thing. It can represent a strain, but can also be a driving force to move us to change. We are each wired in a certain way that feeds into how we deal with this tension.

Ask yourself, are you: *Living in the past and present? Living fully in the present? Living in the present and future?*

The delicate challenge comes in understanding what space those around us are living in. If you are a "live in the moment" person, and a person close to you is focused on both the past and present...it can cause some strain in your views and perceptions. You need to find the balance as you both navigate that tension. We often hear our relatives comment on their wonderful past, the "good ole' days", whereas, many of us think TODAY are the good days, and others cannot wait to see what the future has to offer us. It takes understanding and balance, and an acceptance that the past, present and future are all vital parts of our lives, and are all inextricably linked.

Reimagine. It's been a word you've heard a lot since I joined AJA back in August. According to our friends at Webster's, Reimagine means: reinterpret imaginatively; rethink. Here at AJA, it means to view the school through a new pair of lenses – to take a fresh look at every single detail here and to review, reevaluate, revise, reflect and reimagine the possibilities. We look at this Reimagine process as an incredibly positive one. The outcome, in our minds, is to fine-tune our school – Upper, Middle, Lower and ECD – to be the best possible environment for the children, academically, spiritually and social-emotionally. That is why we started to **Reimagine AJA**. And, as we move forward, you - AJA parents and community members - will have a voice in the Reimagine process.

In the meanwhile, I want to clarify something for all of you. During this in depth process, while we are doing a deep dive into academics, programs, Judaics, admissions, marketing, finances, etc etc etc...we are still keeping our eye on something very important. That is our past - our heritage and history as Greenfield Hebrew Academy and as Yeshiva Atlanta. As Jews, it is our responsibility to remember. To face forward and look toward the future, but to never (!) forget our history, our traditions and our background. In his Nobel Prize lecture in 1986, Elie Wiesel reminded us of the respected historian Simon Dubnow, who over and over implored his fellow inhabitants in the Riga ghetto: "Yiddin, schreibt un farschreibt" — "Jews, write it all down." There are six things that the Torah commands us to remember on a daily basis. As Jews, we have always connected an intense significance to remembrance. That is just part of who we are, and who we want our children to be.

Our connection to our GHA/YA past is of tremendous importance to us as we Reimagine and revise, and we acknowledge how everything connects to our present and our future. Walking the halls at both schools, you'll see plaques of dedication and remembrance, and artwork from early years at GHA and YA that decorate our walls, a constant reminder of the students who have graced these halls. Class composites, ranging from the 1960's to our most recent graduating class, are truly a slice of history here at the school.

In that light, we are excited and honored to be featuring our Alumni and their D'verei Torah, in addition to their thoughts on what AJA means to them. We'll include a link to those, below this letter, in each of my Thursday Thoughts. We are very appreciative of those Alumni who have offered to provide these meaningful insights to us.

Wishing you and your families a peaceful and warm Shabbat as we navigate through the past, present and future together. I would love to hear your thoughts on what you would like us to Reimagine at AJA, and encourage you to share those with me.

L'shalom.

Are You Ready to “Be IN”?



November 3, 2016

2 Chesvan 5777

Dear AJA Community,

Remember the game, “I Spy” that we all played as children - “*I spy something small*”, “*I spy something blue*”, “*I spy something shiny*”? Today, as I walked around the school here is some of what I “spied”:

Beautiful Israeli music being piped into the carpool areas to start the day with great energy

Teachers, hard at work, ensuring all children have a day full of learning and fun

Students with Chromebooks and books ready for General Studies and Judaics

A lunchroom filled with children and delicious food, together with their teachers

Children in the art room, being inspired to create and explore

The Upper School Boys Basketball team heading off to a tournament in Memphis

Students on both campuses preparing for their upcoming theatrical performances

Classrooms filled with cool air conditioning keeping our children cool in this Atlanta heat (which, by the way, isn't it NOVEMBER??)

This is just a glimpse into what happens under the roof at each campus. All of these important components of our school (and many more) come directly from your volunteer hours and tuition dollars. But, here's the thing that some of you may or may not realize. Your tuition pays for what is imperative to run this school and make it wonderful for the children. And, there are still so many amazing programs and technologies we want to bring to your children, as we **Reimagine AJA**. Tuition alone does not cover these. What will? Your contributions to the AJA Annual Campaign. That is what will help make this wonderful school...exceptional.

Today, as we launch the AJA Annual Campaign, I “spy”: New STEM labs, Cutting edge technology in the classrooms and in the new Upper School Media Center, Fine Arts program in the Upper School, a Makerspace (a community center with tools for sewing, woodworking, engineering), an Innovative and relevant Judaics program, increased Professional Development, an Athletic Program expansion. I could go on and on.

We are working hard to **Reimagine AJA**...can you help us get there? Are you **IN**? Since tuition alone cannot fund the full cost of the excellent education AJA provides, we need to count you **IN**. With your generous gift to our 2016-2017 AJA Annual Campaign, you will be **IN**vested, **IN**volved, **IN**fluential and **IN**cluded in our very important AJA mission.

Thanks to those who have already responded and contributed. We are grateful. AJA Community, you'll be hearing from us again, and when you do, we ask you to **Be IN**. Please remember the importance of where the money from this fund goes. Let's work together to turn this wonderful AJA into the EXCEPTIONAL AJA we are all Reimagining.

L'shalom.

Our Village.



November 17, 2016
16 Cheshvan 5777

Dear AJA Community,

I have found over the years that it's important to identify what you know and what you don't - what you can do and what doesn't come as easily.

Exhibit A: this past Shabbat, Florence took our daughter, Eliana out of town to a Bat Mitzvah. There I was, faced with flying solo with Aviva and Ezra. I knew exactly what I needed to do. I called in the reinforcements. My friend was gracious enough to help, and offered to take my youngest for various pieces of Shabbat, so I was able to attend community events, while also being Abba (father) to my own Leubitz community.

It was a perfect arrangement. I joined the **Shabbos Project Block Party** at Beth Jacob on Shabbat. This was a worldwide initiative that drew at least 1,000 people in Toco Hills - and I was in awe of how the community was gathered for such a positive and special Shabbat lunch. The message of strength of community was everywhere.

Sunday morning, the kids and I enjoyed the **AJA Neon Dance Party** with well over 80 people - many of whom were new families who came to tour our school. (We anticipate a full ECD this coming year!) The kids danced, played and had a ball. It was a very diverse crowd, and gave me yet another glimpse into the connection within our community (this view was a little more fluorescent and loud, though!)

My weekend concluded Sunday night with the **L'chaim Event**, celebrating 18 years for the Chabad of North Fulton. I was moved by the speakers' stories of the growth of this Chabad community. Rabbi Minkowicz and his late wife, Rashi (z"l), built such an incredible community - that was crystal clear. I was taken aback by the diversity in the room, connecting and bonding as a community to honor the late Rashi and celebrate the growth of Chabad of North Fulton.



The overall theme of my weekend was one simple word: Community. It ran through my head constantly. After my dear wife and daughter arrived safely home on Sunday night, I had time to reflect on the weekend.

Our Village.

My conclusions:

1- Florence is amazing. (she never reads my emails, so tell her I wrote this, please). Seriously. I did my best to pinch hit, but no one keeps the Leubitz family running like she does. She keeps it all moving like I operate this school, with systems and protocols and plans that work. I follow her plans, and it just works. But, for me to run the show without her...er... (changing the subject...)

2- Homes are like schools. My time flying solo and trying to run the house, started me thinking of the similarity to how homes and schools run, and then I thought about my leadership style at AJA. Just as I needed help to coordinate the weekend, I was reminded that no Head of School is the expert in all things. An effective HOS finds the best teachers, staff and administrators and lets them thrive in their own areas of excellence. We have some of the most talented and qualified staff here at AJA, I am grateful to have them here. I couldn't do it without their expertise.

3- It's all about Community. In Real Estate the key is "Location. Location. Location". Using Creative Rabbinic License, I'd revise it to: "Community. Community. Community." We need each other. We depend, trust and lean on each other, and we are each a part of a village. In this village, we each have a role. One of my roles is to challenge and empower the faculty and administrators here to work toward their full potential. Along those same lines, I challenge you.

What is your area of expertise? Can you come teach a class at the school? Can you open your home to a new family for Shabbos or a Sunday meal? Can you volunteer with the PTSA or Booster Club? Is your heart in a non-for-profit and we need to know about it here at AJA? What can you add to your/our community? Email Director of Admissions, Erica Gal, egal@atljewishacademy.org, and she'll make sure to connect you with the right person to help you find your role in the village - to help give back to your family, friends and your AJA community.

We are incredibly fortunate to be a part of the AJA Community and the Atlanta Jewish Community. I do know, community doesn't come to us by chance, we have to build it. And, I believe that our children deserve nothing less.

L'shalom.

What's Your Blind Spot?



December 2, 2016

2 Kislev 5777

Dear AJA Community,

One of the very first things they teach you when you're learning to drive is to watch out for "blind spots" - those areas that are so close to us, that the rear view mirrors cannot pick them up. We must therefore get out of our comfort zone, and actually turn our heads to ensure that it is safe to stop or make a necessary turn.

We can apply this metaphor to our own lives at those times when things are "too close" to be seen - when our ego and pride cover up our shortcomings, thus, creating a blind spot. **A blind spot is an area that we can't see, unless we take the time to look.** The funny thing about blind spots is that we can see other people's blind spots just fine, it's our own that we struggle with.

One of the many great features of the Torah is that it does not shy away from exposing the blind spots of our ancestors. We learn from the story of Yitzchak, that we are all blind to something. Maybe it's a blind spot in a relationship; perhaps we have a blind spot when it comes to G-d. Maybe we are blind to our own qualities and our own challenges. We are sometimes blind to our own blind spots. Ironic, yes?

From the Torah we know that Yitzchak had a literal blind spot. He lost his eyesight towards the end of his life. But it seemed that Yitzchak was more than physically blind and was unable to make a solid character assessment. When charged with the task of choosing one of his sons to receive the *bracha* and serve as the next family representative, he chose Esav (who used his hunting skills to swindle people) instead of the wholesome and pure Yaakov.

To understand Yitzchak's thought process, like all good amateur therapists, it helps to understand the relationship with his own father, Avraham. He was a prominent man and was the star. He was after all, Avraham (*av hamon hagoyim*). He had the initiative, and was recognized for his contributions to the world. He unveiled circumcision; inaugurated the concept of *bikkur cholim* (visiting the sick); made the first *seudat hodaah* (a celebratory meal after a mitzvah); fought powerful kings to save Lot, and argued with G-d to save Sodom. Avraham stood firm for what he believed was right. Avraham, for all these reasons, will always be a powerful figure in the Torah.

Yitzchak, as opposed to Avraham, was not a powerful figure, he was not a catalyst for change. What was Yitzchak known for? What did Yitzchak accomplish in his life? He was passive and his only claim to fame was being the child selected for slaughter.

The events of Parshat Toldot changed the way Yitzchak looked at the world. He was forced to confront his own legacy. As Yitzchak's life was drawing to a close, he reflected, saw that he had not made an impact in this world, as he wasn't even able to sustain his father's earlier accomplishments. In some respects, Yitzchak may have seen his life as a failure.

What's Your Blind Spot?

So why did Yitzchak initially choose Esav over Yaakov?

Yitzchak believed that Esav, with a little love and guidance would be better equipped to sustain Avraham's initiatives. Esav was cunning and daring. He could make things happen. Esav was a man of the world, a man of action, courageous and bold. Although he used questionable methods, Esav had what it took to bring change to the people, and Yitzchak saw Esav as the true successor to Avraham.

So why, in the end, did Yaakov get the blessing?

Because of trickery or some kind of ruse? This is the most important point of this Parsha. Yaakov came to this "meeting" dressed in Esav's clothes and covering his arms with goat skins to resemble his brother's hairy complexion. But, Yitzchak was not tricked, he was not deceived. Yitzchak knew precisely to whom he was giving the blessing! It was at THIS moment, that Yitzchak saw a different Yaakov. A Yaakov willing to take action, albeit not through the best means, but he was ready to make things right. Yaakov took on some of the characteristics of his grandfather, became fit to receive the *bracha* and engage the world. At that moment when Yaakov took on some of the traits of Esav and Avraham, Yitzchak cried out "*hakol kol Yaakov vihayidyim yiday Esav!* (Yaakov you have successfully merged the man of the tent and the man of action!)

Yitzchak looked inward late in life and identified his core weakness. He "sensed" his blind spots and took steps to change the future. Once we are set in our ways, it is difficult for us to see our blind spots, let alone to make significant changes in them. Just like with Yitzchak and Yaakov, unless we take the time to look, we can miss our own blind spots.

As a school, it is important that we take a look at our blind spots, both as individuals and collectively as an institution. **We encourage you, our parents and community, to reach out to us when YOU see a blind spot we may be missing. One way we will be reaching out to you for input will be via a series of parent and community surveys we are designing.** We want to know what you think, and your input is vital to the continued success of our school. Until those surveys come out, as always, I encourage you to reach out to me via email, phone or a good ole' fashioned *panim el panim* (face-to-face) conversation.

In the spirit of this week's Parsha, I encourage each of us to open our eyes, remove the blinders and take the time to look at our own blind spots this Shabbat.

L'shalom.



The Essence of Chanukah.

December 8, 2016

8 Kislev 5777

Dear AJA Community,

We have a unique opportunity and challenge this year. Chanukah falls late in the month, so we are on a school break during all 8 days. If we are deliberate in our planning, we can all find new ways to celebrate and share the Chanukah light authentically. It can be volunteering in the community, focusing on community service, *tikkun olam* or just sharing a nice family meal learning and creating new Chanukah memories, after lighting the menorah together. The focus is finding those special ways to bring the essence of Chanukah to the forefront with ourselves and our children.

It is important to remember that the essence of Chanukah is more than just a military victory or a miracle of lights and oil. It represents something that was as important over 21 centuries ago as it still is today.

The Jewish people were victorious in their refusal to assimilate into the Hellenistic culture. We didn't want to just go with the flow (*when do we ever?!*) and accept their teachings, celebrations and beliefs. Today, we face a similar "battle". Although, on a daily basis in the U.S. we are not pushed toward other holidays or religions, we are still surrounded by them. This becomes even more apparent during this specific time of the year. Everywhere we turn outside of our community, we are exposed to the lights, decorations, music and festivities of surrounding cultures. They are beautiful and bright and special, but they are not ours.

This time of year, it becomes challenging, and at the same time more imperative, to embrace our Judaism. To show our pride as members of this incredible community. To remember our Jewish values and those we share with our children daily. To remind ourselves and our families about the essence of Chanukah, and about the focus we have as Jews to stand strong and hold tight to our connection to our community. Notice my word choice here, folks...embrace. *Hold tight*. This is an important time to communicate and demonstrate a deep love for our faith and heritage, to encourage our feeling for and attachment to Judaism - and embrace it.

I have found over the years, the holidays that resonate most with the children - those they will remember into their adulthood - are those that are infused with meaning and purpose. (and some of your Nana's delicious brisket doesn't hurt...) These memories and meaning will create a connection for your children, not only to the actual holiday, but will help them continue to embrace our beautiful Jewish community, long after the Chanukah candles are gone.

Some events and resources for Chanukah can be found here. If you have more to share, please let us know so we can share with our AJA community.

Event: Grand Menorah Lightings around Atlanta

Online Event: Share the Lights World Project

Event: Young Israel of Toco Hills, Pre-Chanukah Carnival 12/18 - youth@yith.org

Event: Pinch Hitter Program

Article: Teaching the Meaning of Chanukah

Article: 8 Thoughts for 8 Nights

Article: Making Chanukah with Children Meaningful

Article: Chanukah Insights and Stories

Video: The Fight for Freedom

L'shalom.



Expand Your Jewish Lens.



January 6, 2017

8 Tevet 5777

Dear AJA Community,

We each have a different view as we look through our own Jewish and communal lens. Some see *Gemara* (Talmud) and *Halacha* (Jewish law). Some see Fiddler on the Roof. Some see homemade challah. Some see dancing and celebrating during holidays. Some see Israel and Hebrew language. Some see Toco Hills. Some see Dunwoody. Some see “OTP” (I recently learned that term!). What do you see?

What is your lens when you view it from your seat at the Shabbat table each Friday night and/or Saturday afternoon? Do you see a small intimate group of friends or family as you usher in Shabbat? Is your Shabbat a time to unplug and cherish the quiet from your daily routine?

Regardless of what your Shabbat looks like, the moment the sun sets on Friday evening, the mood changes, and it becomes special, meaningful and significant.

Wouldn't it be incredible if we have one big shul that could offer all things to all people? That we all gather under one roof to sing, learn together, share Torah and celebrate the diversity of what we each see through our Jewish lens? My hope is that we can build this by all coming together to share Shabbat. So, **I ask you to step out of your comfort zone, meet new people and illustrate for your children what it means to be a part of a larger community - the AJA Community.**

I ask you to Reimagine One Shabbat.

Look through your Jewish lens, and imagine you are now surrounded by hundreds of people, all there to share in candlelighting, Shabbat meals and inspiring davening led by area Rabbis along with special guests and AJA students. This Reimagined Shabbat I speak of is the first ever **AJA Family Shabbaton** and we can't wait to share it together as an AJA Community.

I ask you to please mark your calendars for February 3 & 4. We will have a Shabbat filled with rich Tefillah, incredible speakers, delicious food, activities for all ages, and a wonderful sense of community for this special Shabbat. You can participate in one program, one meal, one activity...or join us for events over the entire 2 days. Hospitality will be provided and details will be sent to you next week, so stay tuned.

I can't tell you how excited I am to have our entire AJA Community - of all ages - here under one roof to Reimagine Shabbat. I look forward to creating a beautiful new vision of AJA Shabbat **together**.

L'shalom.

Honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.



January 12, 2017

14 Tevet 5777

Dear AJA Community,

I've often wondered what it would look like to have school on MLK Day. Please, don't get me wrong, I place a **tremendous** value on and have reverence for the work and teachings that Dr. King gave to the world. It just intrigues this Rabbi to imagine what a school day would look like on a day that we are together as a community, at the school, and honoring this important man. The day would surely start with davening, as usual, however we'd most likely add specific and relevant Torah that would apply to Dr. King. Certain pieces of the day would remain the same...classes, Judaics, lunch, recess...you get the idea. But it would simply have to be different. **By the nature of what the day means, it would have to be.** Even those pieces of the day that were "the usual" would take on new meaning. But, we'd be surrounded by programs, events, discussions and focus that would reinforce the message of the day. I think it would be incredibly meaningful to share that day together. (Note: this is not my way to announce that school is "on" for Monday...)

With that being said, here is the challenge. This Monday, January 16th is a day where we are not at work or at school, but it is not "just a Monday". Instead, let's remind ourselves and our children of the meaning and importance of the day. The memorial component along with the celebratory component are equally as important. We can reflect with awe and reverence as we memorialize a man whose impact on our country and on our world was immeasurable, while we celebrate his life and bring his light and values to our own lives. The question is, *how can we do that on other days, not just the day of observing his memory?*

In Judaism, we do not have a Torah holiday for the giving of the Torah. There is no specific day that is designated for remembrance of that occasion. In fact, the Talmud debates when the events at Mount Sinai actually occurred! Instead, we are required that on a daily basis, we should celebrate and reflect as if the Torah was given to us today. What a concept, to celebrate something so meaningful - Every. Single. Day. *(If you want to know more, please explore the commentaries at the beginning of Shemot / Exodus, or call or email me and we can discuss!)* It would be so meaningful and the ultimate tribute to Dr. King, if we recalled his lessons more often than just on that one calendar day that bears his name.

As we look ahead to honoring, celebrating and memorializing Dr. King, I think you will all agree, that we could each use a little more of his lessons and light in our country these days. Here are some ideas of how you can bring this day to life:

Visit the King Center
Staffing Rebecca's Tent Shelter with Young Israel of Toco Hills
Hands on Atlanta MLK Community Service Program
MLK Day at Center For Civil and Human Rights
Georgia Tech MLK Celebration
Atlanta History Center Free Admission

I invite you to share with me how your family made this a meaningful day.

L'shalom.

Tolerance and Appreciation of Our Differences.



January 19, 2017

21 Tevet 5777

Dear AJA Community,

As Inauguration Day approaches tomorrow, there is a word that keeps popping into my head...**tolerance**. There are many opposing views in our world, in our country, in our states, cities and even our shuls as to what is "correct". And, while many people are open to other views, regardless of if they personally embrace them, some are not.

This tension leads me to the question *"why do we find it so challenging to live in harmony, within an environment of intellectual honesty and independent thinking? Why are we unable to respect or even dialogue with those whom we disagree?"*

The root of the problem, I believe - revolves around a lack of tolerance. It is this intolerance, the belief that any one person has a claim to the only truth that breeds the infighting and the lack of mutual respect which threatens the very fabric of our future. It will not surprise you, that the intolerance is most acute in the areas of religious matters - what is really troubling, is the intolerance regarding fundamental religious labeling, and judgement based on superficial externalities; it is here where the challenges seem the most acute.

The problem is a Jewish problem - and also a Modern/Orthodox problem. If Orthodox Jews who claim to be nuanced and critically-minded cannot value or at least appreciate multiple *halachik* (Torah-based legal rulings) viewpoints then we threaten the vitality and the future of Orthodoxy as we know it. If an open and intellectually-sophisticated Modern Orthodoxy is to survive, then we must find a way to tolerate, appreciate nuance, and the possibility of multiple Orthodox *halachik* truths.

There is a wonderful lesson in this week's Torah portion that I think can help serve as a model as to how we should live as open-minded and tolerant Jews.

Pharaoh commands the Hebrew midwives to kill every male child. Shifrah and Puah bravely resist and instead of fearing Pharaoh, they feared G-d and thus allowed the Jewish boys to live. One of the boys allowed to live as a result of their bravery was Moshe himself. These women - two simple midwives - allowed for the birth of Moshe, and in return, G-d blessed these midwives with high honor.

Shifra and Puah didn't follow the party line. They didn't acquiesce and they did not follow the status quo. They were able to see the big picture and did what was right in their eyes and what they believed was right in the eyes of G-d. They did not do the safe thing; but they did the right thing.

It is often safer and easier for us to simply tow the party line. It is so hard to be the first to break the status quo. It is challenging to be a Shifra and Puah. It's difficult to reach out and dialogue with someone with whom you deeply disagree.

Appreciating our differences - which is a step more than just tolerating - is important for us as well. There is a Mishnah in Sanhedrin that states that G-d makes each human being different from every other; as such, everyone should be able to say with confidence, 'the world was created just for me'. Chassidic literature understands this to mean that each of us has strengths and weaknesses that distinguish us from every other person; each of us has a unique spiritual task.

Maybe it would serve us and our larger community well to remember; when we grasp the truth we cannot do so in its totality, only G-d can do that. We, however, see only part of the truth. Like pieces of a puzzle, no individual piece gives us the whole picture.

Tolerance. Appreciation of Our Differences. I ask that you keep these in mind, as you go through your days and weeks and months...and most specifically, as another Presidential Inauguration is added to the history books tomorrow.

L'shalom.



Reimagine Lower School Judaic Studies.



January 26, 2017

28 Tevet 5777

Dear AJA Community,

One of the many changes we've made at the school is to add more resources to strengthen our Judaics program. For me, it is one of the most important pieces of the AJA puzzle, and it needed some updates and enhancements. I was going to share them with you, but thought I'd go right to the source. Debbie Bornstein, Director of Judaic Studies, K - 8th Grade, has put together her view on how we are Reimagining Judaic Studies at the Lower School.

Read Debbie's article on the following page.

I am so proud of the strength of our Judaics program, and am thankful for our outstanding Judaics staff who bring it all to life for the students, both at our Lower and Upper School. As we continue to push our students for stronger text skills - at times they push back - as it is especially challenging. These hard pieces are often the keys to success. We need your help to support their stress, and to remind them of the importance of unlocking the rich history of our textual past.

In her views, Debbie mentions the importance of community. I look forward to having the AJA Community gathered at our SOLD OUT Family Shabbaton on February 3 & 4, and seeing the children share the Torah they have learned here with our families.

L'shalom.



Reimagine Judaic Studies @ AJA Lower School

According to the Pew Research Center, only 28% of Jews feel that being part of a Jewish community is an essential aspect of being Jewish. At AJA, our entire mission revolves around the importance of community. Our Judaic studies program strives to create literate and fully-invested members of the Jewish community who exhibit a sustained commitment to our people, our history, and our values. We want our graduates to feel and live a life of connection to Judaism.

How do we get there?

- We provide experiential programming and enthusiastic role models who exhibit a love of Israel and Judaism.
- Our curriculum is structured around problem and project-based learning to create authentic connections between students and our culture.
- Chaggim (holidays) are a focus for integration of different methods of instruction and evaluation.
- Starting in 1st grade, our students are introduced to texts and when coupled with Hebrew language instruction, our students learn the skills for navigating our siddur (prayer book), exploring our Chumash (printed Torah), decoding our Mishna (oral Torah), and delving into our Talmud.
- As students progress through our school, we nurture developmentally appropriate higher level thinking skills corresponding to each modality of learning.

The foundation of any successful program is the faculty. We are focused on finding and developing first class educators. Our plans call for an expansion of the Judaic Studies faculty for the 2017-18 school year and we are currently accepting applications, from both the United States and in Israel.

AJA will be introducing a comprehensive evaluation system to track our students' progress through the Judaic studies curriculum. This data will allow us to assess and track mastery and knowledge and structure our spiraled curriculum appropriately to maximize student success and learning. Currently under development, the initial roll-out for this program will be in 3rd and 4th grades with additional grades to follow in subsequent years.

This year, we have reimaged our Birkat HaMazon at the end of lunch. The words are now easily accessible to the students on a projection screen where they can follow along with the faculty member facilitating and adding Al HaMichya and Borei Nefashot when appropriate. Students are now exposed to a wider variety of brachot (blessings) which we hope they will continue to use throughout their lives.

We are introducing Chumash towards the end of 1st grade (previously 2nd grade), in order to start textual skills earlier in 2nd grade. This will allow our students to be acclimated with learning from a text, to create the foundation for Torah study.

We have also reimaged middle school Tefillah. Students now attend classes with their Judaics studies instructors where they learn about the prayers and their significance in addition to recitation each day.

Our 1st - 6th grade buddy oneg program which is held once or twice each month has been reimaged as a Parsha learning opportunity with handouts containing Divrei Torah and exercises to help our students gain an understanding of the weekly portion.

We hope that our work here continues long after our students leave these doors. Lifetime engagement of our students in a commitment to living Jewish lives and Mitzvot (commandments), being connected to their Torah and Jewish community, and providing continuity to their own children is central to who we are as AJA. And we can't do it alone. School provides only part of the equation for our mission.

Parents, family, friends, synagogue, and youth groups are essential components of success. What is important in our lives is important to our children. So I encourage you to come to school and visit us during Tefillah or take your child to Shul with you on Shabbat and show them your love and your commitment.

- Debbie Bornstein, Director of Judaic Studies, K-8

Looking In The Rear View Mirror (Just this once!)



February 2, 2017

6 Sh'vat 5777

Dear AJA Community,

Much of my focus since we started “talking” on Thursdays has been to Reimagine AJA and focus on the future and what is next. I embrace the concept of looking back at the past as needed, while keeping our eye on what is ahead...looking through the windshield vs. the rear view mirror, so to speak.

However...there are times that reflection is necessary and also inspiring! Don't you agree? This is one of those times. As we hit the 100th day of school at AJA (and my 1st 100 days here!) it feels right to share some highlights of the 1st 100 days of school at AJA. There are too many to include here, so I compiled a Leubitz Top Ten:

1. **Streamlined parent and community communication.** We instituted our weekly Tuesday Talks and Thursday Thoughts - what you need to know to stay in the AJA loop.
2. **We are proud of our students** who have won many honors, including Science Fair awards, Literary contests, International STEM competitions, and more.
3. **We enjoyed school wide gatherings**, bringing all ages together to celebrate the Chaggim. And the Ruach continues daily, strengthening the connection and pride in Judaism and AJA at the school and in the community.
4. **Our newly renovated Library Learning Center**, which brought a hub of 21st Century Learning directly to AJA.
5. **Incredible new Upper School construction**, which is on target for completion this summer.
6. **An accelerated enrollment process**, which allowed us to predict enrollment with 90%+ accuracy, leading to a more accurate budget and (p.s.) a 96% retention rate!
7. **The continued quality and professionalism of our AJA teachers** as witnessed every day at both campuses.
8. **The creation of a full calendar for the 2017-18** school year in January to allow families more time to plan ahead.
9. **Finally, we have a detailed analysis of our AJA finances and projections**, so we can be more fiscally responsible in managing all areas of the school.
10. **What do YOU think is missing from this list...**I'm all ears.

And, there are so many more. To see the whole list, fasten your seatbelts...and click [here](#). It's been a busy 100 days. Now, back to looking out of the front windshield!

Over the next few weeks, I'm going to share some very exciting updates and initiatives that we are working on for the remainder of the school year. And, in the interest of transparency, I will continue communicating my observations and even some of the obstacles we are facing. As you know, we sent out a parent survey to all current AJA families, and those results combined with learnings from the small group meetings (fireside chats) I've had with teachers and our observations during Wednesday Walks to the classrooms will help us formulate our plans moving forward.

Thanks for sharing your children with us. Here's to an incredible rest of the school year.

L'shalom.





Every Child Has Their Own Path.

February 9, 2017

13 Sh'vat 5777

Dear AJA Community,

As I mentioned in an earlier Thursday Thoughts post, starting as infants, our AJA children are on a journey. This journey will eventually lead to something deep and profound. I have learned over the years that there are multiple connection and entry points in Judaism. Not every student starts at the same entry point, and not every student follows the same path. Along those lines, one of my favorite pieces of Torah is:

חֲנֹךְ לַנֶּעַר עַל פִּי דְרָכָיו, גַּם כִּי יִזְקֵן לֹא יִסּוּר מִמֶּנָּה

Educate a child according to his way; even when he grows old, he will not turn away from it. (Proverbs 22:6)

I am proud that at AJA we have been at the forefront in offering a program for children with specific learning differences. **The Matthew Blumenthal M'silot Program** has offered many entry points for a student's Jewish Journey at AJA and is a crucial component of our religious mission at our school.

Why is M'silot part of our AJA mission? Our NEW M'silot program is groundbreaking! We are already the only ECD -12th Grade Atlanta Jewish Day School for all mainstream Jewish children, now we can even serve the children who don't fit into the "typical" box. That is who we are. Inclusive and embracing - middot. I would have it no other way. EVERY child deserves a solid Jewish education as their foundation, regardless of their learning styles and needs. (Can you tell how strongly I feel about this?!)

I am so appreciative of Diane Marks, the Director of the Matthew Blumenthal M'silot Program, for all the hard work and focus that she has put forth to nurture and grow this program. We are facing a 2017-18 school year with some M'silot classes that are already full! Diane is also assisting me by running the new MAP testing for 2nd - 8th Grade, as we mentioned earlier this week via email. Todah Rabah, Diane!

To give you more information about M'silot and our exciting new vision for this important program, I asked Diane, to share more about our **REIMAGINED** M'silot program. (to the right)

When I first came to AJA and learned all about the Matthew Blumenthal M'silot program from Diane, I knew it was one of the most incredible components of this school. To offer a quality and specialized education to all Jewish children is a mitzvah, and M'silot delivers on this mitzvah every single day. Thank you to the teachers who help make this program a reality, and who guide the M'silot students on their own specific paths.

L'shalom.

Matthew Blumenthal M'silot Program

Dear AJA Community,

I am so proud of this program! The Matthew Blumenthal M'silot program is now in its 16th year and going strong. Looking back at the success stories of the over 200 students who have come through this program, I am overwhelmed. I am grateful for the opportunity to talk about this very special program and to share how we have Reimagined M'silot.

What is the M'silot program? We meet the needs of students from K - 4th Grade with specific learning differences who need an academic environment that allows them the setting, additional time and the specialized instruction to meet their learning goals. These are often some of our brightest and most talented students that just need the right learning environment to reach their potential!

How does the program work? Students receive the same curriculum as all students in their grade. They "learn how they learn" and obtain strategies to be successful in all settings. Our students spend a considerable amount of time with their peers - learning, problem solving, and socializing - this makes our program unique. We have also identified that early intervention; providing students with the right tools and instruction at the right time, can make the difference between a student who loves learning / feels successful, and one who continues to struggle with school year after year developing a low self-esteem, and often a feeling of helplessness. We keep our eyes opened to monitor the students' development! What happens after M'silot? Our 4th grade class is a transition year in which students will spend time in the general studies mainstream class with the M'silot teacher supporting. Our students are extremely successful moving forward academically and many are accepted to some of the country's best colleges.

What's new?

We are continuing to update the program to keep improving what is already working so well:

- We now offer an occupational therapy option, either individual or group.
- Our Lower School Jewish Studies Curriculum includes English-speaking instruction, which will parallel instruction happening in the child/ren's grade level Judaic Studies classes.
- The way we're offering support in the middle school is changing. Rather than offering the self-contained model in middle school, students will participate in the mainstream classroom with a co-taught model. Chumash/ Mishnah courses will be taught in the mainstream, by a Judaics teacher, who will provide delivery of text studies in English.

AJA is so fortunate to have this highly respected program offered in order to enhance the education of all of our students.

- Diane Marks, Director of the Matthew Blumenthal M'silot Program

Toda Rabah.



February 16, 2017

20 Sh'vat 5777

Dear AJA Community,

You've heard me say that this is a special place. You've read my posts about the wonderful things that happen under this roof. Many of you have witnessed this firsthand at the numerous events and family programs we have had at the school. But...there is magic that happens here that you really haven't seen. It is what happens in each of our classrooms, the gifts that our teachers share with the children - every. single. day. It's no surprise to me that visitors to AJA (most recently two educators from a very progressive NY Jewish Day School) are blown away by the love, attention and education our teachers give to their students.

We often have our eyes on the big picture. I mentioned many of these in my recap of the 1st 100 days of the school year and weekly in these emails. I'm here to tell you today that the holiness and sacred nature of our work happens when you are not here. It's the little things at 8:01 am, 8:02 am, 8:03 am... It's when the people who are truly on the "frontlines" as our "soldiers" are in the trenches. It's at 10:04 am, 10:05 am, 10:06 am... Our AJA teachers insure that these precious minds under our roof receive the social-emotional and academic focus they need and deserve. It's our teachers who make the student's challenges their own, and help the children tackle what they think are HUGE issues. And they are huge to a child. 12:07 pm, 12:08 pm, 12:09 pm.

Teaching happens in the classroom. It happens at recess. It happens at lunch. It happens while our students are navigating interpersonal relationships and interacting with their peers. 1:10 pm, 1:11 pm, 1:12 pm.

We talk about L'dor V'dor (generation to generation) from the perspective of Jewish continuity - that we are all links in an ongoing chain. I ask you to consider this...one of the most important links in the chain is the connection your child has to Judaism during every school day - via their teachers. Without that link, simply put...there would be no chain. 2:13 pm, 2:14 pm, 2:15 pm.

Here's a thought - this week, let's all show appreciation to our teachers. How can we do this? Well, I have some ideas:

- 1 - email** your child's teacher this week. Share your gratitude or a lesson your child has shared with you that they learned at school.
- 2 - post** something positive on your Facebook page or your class page...and tag the teacher!
- 3 - ask** a teacher "Is there anything I can do to help YOU?"
- 4 - talk** to your child about how THEY can uniquely show gratitude to their teacher(s).
- 5 - take a glance** at some of the specifics that our teachers have done with their classes this school year, and if something resonates with you, tell them!

So, here's to our teachers.

And, I'll leave you on this note from Talmud: *"Whoever teaches his (child) teaches not only his (child) but also his (child)'s (child) - and so on to the end of generations."*

3:16 pm, 3:17 pm, 3:18 pm.

L'shalom.





AJA Student Nachas.

February 23, 2017
27 Sh'vat 5777

Dear AJA Community,

Who is wise? One who learns from all. Pirkei Avot hits the nail right on the head. I believe that we can all learn from various sources. We just have to open our eyes. Last week we focused on the talented group of teachers we have at AJA, this week I want to highlight another group we all learn from. **Our students.** That's right. Often, our own students become our teachers, and we can learn from their example.

We can learn from their resilience when overcoming challenges, the way they try to navigate social dynamics with respect and honor, how they carefully craft their birthday invitation to be inclusive yet connected to our history, how they greet each other and adults in the building, how they only come in pairs and triads if someone gets hurt at recess, how they write thank you notes to their Head of School, how they thrive academically and athletically, how they choose to spend their free time volunteering or working to improve our community....and the list goes on.

We asked our teachers to share names of students, from ECD - 12th Grade, who have demonstrated something exceptional, and we are going to highlight them here in this email bi-monthly. It was a challenge to narrow the list down this time, as there were so many submissions. I want to acknowledge these special AJA students, who have been recognized for their accomplishments!

Here is the first of many AJA *Nachas* that I will share with you...read all the details about what their teachers' told us.

UPPER SCHOOL	Leah Bader, Nicole Dori, Medad Lytton, Yitzi Zolty, Dan Jutan, Ezra Blaut, Zach Mainzer
MIDDLE SCHOOL	Gefen Beldie and Racheli Seeman, Natanel Gold, Paulina Lebowitz, Sammy Rubin, Renana Shalom, Daliya Wallenstein
LOWER SCHOOL	Oliver Mason, Logan Rabinowitz, Gila Sadinoff, Lindsey Webber, Isaac Weinberg

I look forward to sharing more of this AJA Nachas with you in the coming months. Our children and their accomplishments, both big and small, are what make this school such a special place to be.

L'shalom.

ECD. Kindergarten collection of cans for 100 day mitzvah project • Running Start K turning into readers in only 100 days • Our superb Neon Dance Party • Showing love and compassion for a classmates grandfather who was hospitalized • the pride in calling ourselves “readers”!! • ECD teachers embracing the Reggio concepts--sensory experiences with Loose Parts, units of study based on the interests of the classes, the focus on collaborative work • seeing how every child has progressed in their own way since the beginning of the year • how deep and smart children are • singing at the Chanukah Party in Ivrit • Weather Unit for Winter • The children learning how to use Seesaw to build an online portfolio for each student and communicate with parents.

1st Grade. Colonial Festival • Learning about MLK and reciting part of the “I Have A Dream” speech • Celebrating knowledge daily! • Practicing Habits of Mind “managing impulsive behavior, empathy and persistence” • Sharing Tefillah with all classmates • Sharing hugs, help and kind words with a special friend who visits weekly • When studying MLK Day, first graders stated that they would never drink from a water fountain that excluded some people even if they personally were permitted to do so. It's not fair! • Reading stories into iPads and with the help in the LLC • Students who have just begun reading in English for the first time this year, now reading as well as the others in their reading group. • Students who raise their hands to answer questions knowing they are not sure if their answer is correct or not. • a student who come every day to give me a hug and before her new reading group begins (with the teacher's permission)

2nd Grade. 2nd Grade notes of gratitude to staff and faculty at AJA • Family Game Night with a school full of Math and Game fans • 2nd Graders using animals as candidates to learn the election process and to vote • MLK Freedom Summer Writing - Writing endings to this book following the civic rights act of 1964 • RAK's - Random Acts of Kindness towards each other ...writing notes expressing when someone does something for somebody without being asked to do so • OREO - Duck/Rabbit opinion Writing - Express your opinion, Give a reason, Give an example, Restate your opinion • Sefer Torah workshop where the students made “ink” and wrote their Hebrew names on parchment with a feather

3rd Grade. Learning what a growth mindset is, and to use a growth mindset daily to grow their brains! • Individualizing instruction to maximize each student's rate of progress. • An incredible Havdalah program and an atrium filled with their projects showing the difference between every day and Shabbat • Students learned how to round their numbers using a toy rollercoaster. • guessing the food lesson • converting English recipes to Hebrew for publishing in a class cookbook • In Judaics, an Art activity to show the various lifecycles (butterfly, moon phase, seeds) • writing personal narratives • making edible maps when studying map skills • reading biographies • multiplication /division/3 digit addition and subtraction • learning about hooks and leading sentences in personal narratives

4th Grade. Students writing lyrical poems and completing a captivating chapter book • a student who struggles, made categories of words to use in stories • A reader jumped three levels on a benchmark test since the start of school • One student has learned to giggle when frustrated, instead of crying • STOMP inspired rhythm unit in 4th grade. This was project based unit created entirely by students using recyclable materials and presented in music class • Hebrew birthday unit, having an actual party in class to bring it all to life • Tu B'Shevat unit writing “ads” about saving the trees • Using circle maps often • the immigration unit (studying our own families and friends) • interviewing a friend or relative who immigrated here • games and videos for the project • “change your words, change your mindset” unit and reinforcement • conjugating verbs and creating a booklet • creation of interactive grammar notebooks

5th Grade. The “Buddy Bench” for students who want to be invited to join a group at recess • Reading to their Kindergarten “buddies” • Inclusion of M'silot students into mainstream science & social studies • Growth of technology, including a typing program for our students • Bonding with the Keshet group, warmly welcoming Hebrew speaking students • Writing 5 paragraph personal essays that were meaningful, interesting and organized • Students teaching each other about Ancient Egypt, creating cool artifacts • Learning how to find figurative language in reading, using it in writing (similes are a favorite) • Sharing their insights, listening actively, asking important questions, visualizing, connecting, and searching for life lessons in their reading • Learning about Ancient Mesopotamia, using thinking maps to organize and share their learnings • Preparing their own lessons for Mishnah day of learning, adding their own questions about Mitzvot learned in the Torah, and how the Mishnah explains the Mitzvot! • News reports, student-created news broadcasts as if they were reporters interviewing Yoseph in jail • Architect project using blueprints for the new construction •

6th Grade. Building a machine to put a net over Haman in March • Mastering Academic Writing that focused on Introduction, Topic Sentences and Conclusions • Using Textual Evidence • Literature Circles • Middle School Silk Road Shark Tank, where students “sold” their idea to a panel of judges • The Tuck Everlasting deconstructed thesis project • Navigating through the Mishnah, to infer big ideas • Applying Mishnah laws and concepts in “Mock Trials” • Creating videos on “Manna Safety” in the desert • How Much is a Handful Project - data analysis and graphing • Creating coordinate graph pictures • “How to Think Like an Engineer” - students designed a new Whirly Gig for a cereal box that would fall to the ground slowly, ensuring maximum entertainment value • Producers from Cartoon Network want to launch a new adventure cartoon featuring a Natural Disaster. Science students will research and then “pitch” their natural disaster to see which one will be used in the new cartoon. • Meeting The Cake Lady!

7th Grade. Seventh Grade analysis of multiple commentaries on why Moshe could not enter Eretz Canaan • The 7th graders were tasked to work as a company to develop an educational product that could be used to teach 2nd graders about the cell • They were challenged to make a stop-motion video of mitosis using clay, beads, and string. The students used these materials, a tripod, and a camera to take pictures • solving and checking equations • students who can tear apart a historical primary document and defend whether or not that document is historically accurate by comparing it to other primary sources

8th Grade. Student Council Mystery Maccabi Project for Chai Life Charity • 8th Graders created “Choose your Adventure” books about the Maccabees to share with 5th Graders • Roller coaster Physics projects, forensic science presentations, stop-motion videos of mitosis and 3D cell models • 9/11 Commencement Ceremony • seeing an 8th grade student who applied Talmudic teachings to contemporary issues! • Pixton comics and double bubble thinking maps analyzing whether or not Yoseph and his brothers evolved spiritually during he course of events in Sefer Beresheet • Acting as forensic scientists, and reconstructing the events of a vehicular accident with knowledge of friction, forces, and Newton's Laws of Motion. • Students can mount a political campaign against their opponents because they have studied the issues and taken a particular stance on them.

Upper School. Thankful Thursday where students send email of thanks to someone in their lives • Proving the authenticity of the Torah being from Sinai • Safe Driver Winners • Ethical discussions galore • The PS I love you party dealing with the tests of Avraham Avinu • Students published in Poetry Anthology • Reading “I am Malala” in entirety and studying new customs • Mastering “How to Read Literature Like a Professor” and using high level analysis skills daily • Mastering High School grammar concepts • Our innovative Upper School Play, “Hank Kimmel Live” created an intimate experience of skit comedy. • Essays, poems and one act plays • Current event students researching and presenting an important and controversial topic from the election • A student who changed his mind and considers going to Israel next year! • An AP English Lit class enjoying the challenges in work and grading, embracing the rigor! • Hamlet the Yid, Hamlet as Harry Potter...reimagining Hamlet • Assembly on Black Lives Matter • Senior Talks during Community Time creating a memorable masterpiece • Student Council and all their accomplishments • Filming parsha videos weekly • Novels and films students who proposed a unique project to strengthen critical reading and writing skills • Collaboration! • MLK, Jr. Service Day • American History students see that many “facts” they had previously learned with actually myths needing to be busted • Chumash students now better understand that there is not a single way to look at the narratives of Sefer Bereishit, coming to appreciate the truth of the Talmudic statement that “these and these are the words of the Living God.” • Our Cause Fair where students presented to their peers to raise public awareness of some of the critical social issues we face today.



Tell Me Your Story...

March 2, 2017

4 Adar 5777

Dear AJA Community,

Once there was a tree...and she loved a little boy...

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...

In the beginning, G-d created...

When powerful stories begin, they grab your attention and captivate you. They pull you in and you feel as if you were actually there, in the moment, experiencing it all with the storyteller. Stories help us remember - good and bad times, along with memories. They keep people and moments alive as long as the stories are told. A good story (and we have all heard plenty of the opposite!) is **personal, passionate and provides specific examples**. Those are the stories that resonate with us and that we are likely to remember and repeat!

It occurred to me, sitting around the Shabbos table last Shabbat, that in Judaism, storytelling is like oxygen. We **must** tell stories to keep our Jewish practice relevant and our traditions and customs passed along - *L'dor Vador* (from generation to generation). It is our heritage. It is the Jewish way to write and tell stories. Our Torah even has these two components...written law and oral law. As Jews, we need our stories.

From the perspective of a school, I have come to realize over the years that the most powerful way to connect with someone is to share your story. When you learn something personal about a friend or colleague, it achieves something far greater than any multi million dollar advertising budget. Your story creates an instant, real and authentic connection. As an AJA Community, we each have our own connection to the school. However, do other people know about it?

So, I ask...what is **your** AJA story? What stands out in your mind as your personal reason why you and your family feel connected to AJA?

When you sing Hatikvah at our school events, do you recall your trip to Israel with your GHA/YA/AJA classmates? Are you an Alum and recently came to watch your own child receive his/her first Siddur? When you daven with your child, do you recall learning the blessings when YOU were a student? Do you get chills hearing your child reading to you from their own Mishnah? Did you walk into the Upper School and see the artwork on the wall that you remember looking at during your own Judaics class years ago? Did you kvell when your child read you his/her persuasive speech on an important social issue for the Cause Fair? Does the school play or Chagiga bring you back to your own childhood performances? Are you moved by the sense of community you feel when you walk through our doors?

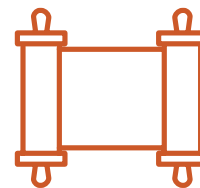
Herein lies your challenge. When we see something frequently, it's not always easy to step back and look at the entire view. The forest from the trees, so to speak. Personally, when I walk into my child's room (no names mentioned to protect the guilty!) I usually see the clutter on the dresser or a messy stack of books. If I look at the big picture, instead I see the photos of friends and family that they chose to display on the dresser and the books open on the night table that they are voraciously reading. My view is now different and the same applies at the school. Take a step back from your everyday view, overlook the growth areas on either campus, and know that we are working around the clock on repairing the blemishes. Instead, I ask you to think of your AJA connection points, focus on the "good stuff" that makes up your own personal and passionate AJA Story. Take a step back from your everyday view and think of what personally connects you to the school.

What is YOUR story at AJA?

I'd love to hear it.

L'shalom.





Purim and V'nahafoch Hu...

March 9, 2017

11 Adar 5777

Dear AJA Community,

MIRUP

(huh?) What on Earth is MIRUP? I'm glad you asked. For those of you who guessed it, nice job. For others, it's simple...it is "PURIM" backwards.

A famous phrase in the Megillah is *v'nahafoch hu* וְנִהְיֶה הוּא - turning things about, or seeing the opposite. We see the phrase actualize throughout the Purim story on many occasions. For example, Haman plots to kill the Jews and demands gallows to be made for the hanging of Mordecai. What happens next? By the end of the story, Haman's name is drowned out with our voices and we read about his demise - hanging from the same gallows he created for our hero.

So I debated writing this entire article backwards, but, quite frankly, that made my head spin. So I decided instead to use this as an opportunity to answer an important question that keeps popping up.

Many of you have asked me "what does Modern Orthodoxy mean at AJA?" I've spoken and taught publicly about the topic, I've written posts about my Religious Vision (Part 1 and Part 2) and have had many sidebar conversations over my 7-ish months at the school and in shul. Today, I want to share what Modern Orthodoxy is at AJA...in Purim Style, and a little sdawkcab. ("backwards". oy!).

AJA is an "Orthodox Light" school.

Nope. We believe in the adherence and follow all of Halacha (Jewish Law). Shabbat, Kashrut and Davening are the foundation. We believe and love that Talmud Torah (Torah study) is a staple each and every day.

We prepare our children to eventually have enough Talmud skills to enter the best Modern Orthodox Yeshivot in Israel. We also teach our women and girls Talmud because we believe that women have a right to the full education that our men have access to.

As a Modern Orthodox school, we daven every day...and we want to infuse the sense of spirit and love of Davening - for it to not only be a way of fulfilling an obligation. We believe that all participants, including women, should feel included in the context of Tefillah at AJA.

We believe that in addition to text skills, Hebrew language immersion connects our children to the land, culture and people of Israel. We are fully committed to remaining the only immersive K-12 Hebrew program in Atlanta, and the only Modern Orthodox school in Atlanta!

We are ONLY for the Modern Orthodox community.

Nice try. We cherish our diversity! This helps us all grow Jewishly and spiritually. We gather as ONE AJA to grow, connect and learn together. We actively recruit families who want an authentic and immersive Jewish experience to join our AJA Family. We embrace dialogue and appreciate nuance from different religious perspectives. We are proud to be Modern Orthodox!

Purim and V'nahafoch Hu...

Men's Torah study has more value than women's.

Not us. We value the importance of women learning Torah, studying Mishnah and davening each morning. We believe that women should have equal access to Torah and Jewish rituals. It's not men or women...it's BOTH. Co-educational studies thrive here. We are proud to be the only Modern Orthodox school in Atlanta!

AJA does not encourage students to follow Kashrut policies.

Not on my watch. We adhere to a strict Kashrut policy inside our building and at all school functions. Kashrut is a vital piece of our educational mission, connecting our students with their authentic heritage in the most basic way. The spirituality that infuses even basic actions in Judaism is a wonderful example of the practical application of mindfulness, and one of the unique aspects of our religious experience. We are a Modern Orthodox school.

Middot stops at our front door.

Are you kidding me? We teach *middot* - character, virtues and values and recognize students for demonstrating them daily. This simply cannot stop at the doors out of the school. We believe that these character traits should follow our students wherever they go, and with whomever they meet. We are a Modern Orthodox school with solid Jewish values.

A first-rate secular education comes at the expense of a solid Judaic studies program.

Not even remotely true! We know that there must be a balance between Judaic and General studies to ensure that our students have a well-rounded education. We pride ourselves on academic strength in both areas. Our graduates go on from AJA to the finest Yeshivot, Seminaries AND also Universities. "This is our Modern Orthodox School."

This is just Part One. I look to you for Part Two. What have I missed here that you want me to add? Please "snail mail" me a letter (ok, this backwards thing stops now...). Please email me with your ideas. I'll include them in the next round.

L'shalom.



A Sneak Peek into the Upper School.

March 16, 2017

18 Adar 5777

Dear AJA Community,

Whoever coined the phrase, “no news is good news” was only partially right. There are times when news is GOOD! This is one of those times. Last week, I donned a hard hat over my kippah, and headed into the new Upper School construction site to take a glance. WOW. It is incredible how it is all coming together.

Therefore, I am thrilled to be the bearer of this GOOD NEWS...

“We are on time and we are on budget!”

The classrooms look like classrooms. The STEM lab framework is all in place. Construction is moving along at a rapid pace in the Learning Commons and Beit Midrash. Phase One/All Academic Components (classrooms, furniture, smart boards, etc.) of the new building, as well as the renovation to the current Lower School building will be ready for the 1st Day of School on August 14th, with the STEM labs and Beit Midrash being completed just a few weeks later. Wait until you see it all. Oh, you want to see the progress? Guess what? I have more good news...you can take a look at our video online.

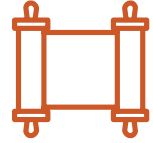
We are on time and on budget and I couldn't be more excited. We'll have updates as to the timing of the Athletic Center (gymnasium, wrestling facility, etc.) after Pesach. There are special naming opportunities at the building that are still available. Just contact me or Natasha Lebowitz and we can tell you about those naming options still available.

We look forward to seeing each of you in the new building at one or more of the many upcoming events and programs planned for the 2017-18 school year. We can't wait to be ONE AJA, on one campus, under one roof in only 5 short months!

L'shalom.



From Generation to Generation.



March 23, 2017

25 Adar 5777

Dear AJA Community,

When my inbox is overflowing, it gets a bit overwhelming. I know you can relate! Lately, my inbox has been filled with emails that stop me in my tracks. They pull me right in and I can't stop reading. These are emails with your AJA stories. I have been floored by the responses to my request for YOUR AJA stories. It has been incredible for me to read the many ways that AJA has impacted your family, and how and why you feel so connected to this school.

Here is a small glimpse into some of the stories. (to keep it brief, I only included a handful of those I have received). We are compiling your stories without including the names or specifics that would reveal the authors (some of you have asked). We want to hear your AJA story. *What is it that connects you to our school? What is it that means the most to you about AJA?* Here are snippets of what your fellow parents, community members, alumni and teachers had to say:

"I look at where our two graduates are now, and what they have achieved. I believe strongly that their success definitely was due in part to GHA/YA/AJA."

"As I teach the children of parents whom I taught in the past, I enjoy seeing how the students are similar to their parents, as well as celebrating their differences. L'dor Vador!"

"When we moved to Atlanta, AJA's warm and inclusive approach won our hearts. It produces kids that are confident, care deeply for others, are inclusive and very well grounded with skills to be successful. They use the Torah learning to follow their life's goals and aspirations."

"At AJA, we look after each other and make sacrifices and honor each other in the good and bad times. I have spent 85% of my life at AJA as a student and teacher. AJA is my life."

"Our family connection to AJA started the minute we walked in the door for the first time. We felt welcomed by the teachers and staff, which led to our family feeling included and instantly comfortable at our new 'home'."

"Years ago, at GHA, I loved when the Pledge was recited and then Hatikvah was sung every morning. I got chills every day. We wanted our daughter to get a strong Jewish education. I am proud of her and know that her background at GHA was a beginning of her pursuit of her career."

I can't emphasize enough the importance of storytelling. In Judaism it is in our souls to keep the stories going (and going, and going, and going!). We read in Shemot 10:2, *"And in order that you should tell into the ears of your children and grandchildren..."* That is one of the main reasons we repeat the story of the Exodus every year at Passover. When we recount those details at our Seder and in shul, we keep that story alive, which encourages a connection to our past and paves the vision for the future.

In our everyday lives, it is amazing that 84% of people trust information and reviews from conversations with friends more than any other source (Nielson). **Word of mouth is one powerful vehicle!** As the stories of the Exodus pave the way for our future as Jews, the future of our school is inextricably linked to the stories about AJA that we tell. These AJA stories and details of your personal connection to the school are priceless. Tell a friend. And tell me. I'd love to hear.

L'shalom.



Who is Wise?

March 30, 2017

3 Nisan 5777

Dear AJA Community,

Eizehu chacham? Ha'lomed mi'kol adam

איזהו חכם? הלומד מכל אדם

The question “*who is wise?*” is posed to us in the Talmud. The answer: he who learns from all people. For our Upper School students, this succinctly sums up their month. Adar was filled with so many opportunities for them to learn and participate in such valuable experiences - I just have to tell you about them. Read more about the programs, accolades, experiences and programs from Adar at the Upper School:

ATHLETICS / Israeli Youth Elitzur Basketball

AHAVAT YISRAEL / Modern Israel Seminar

DEBATE / Moot Beit Din

EDUCATION / Minimester

MITZVAH / Trip to Azerbaijan

PHYSICS / Safe Cracking Competition

POLITICS / Political Process Education

SCIENCE / Tech Fair

THEATER / Girls Chagiga

All I can say is...*Kol hakavod* (respect)!!

Looking ahead...

As you know, we are constructing a new Upper School building. We are not, however, just adding a physical building, we are building a school. Merging together as ONE AJA, allows us to ultimately offer a student experience that is aligned with the goals and mission of AJA. The final product will be an AJA graduate who is accepted to the best colleges and yeshivot, is grounded in middot, and a solid human being who has the skill set to navigate the complexities of the world while being an upstanding citizen. We are creating proud Jewish leaders with compassionate hearts and minds.

I'm so excited about the many amazing things happening at the Upper School, and I'm even more excited about the future...beyond just the physical building. For next school year, we are looking feverishly at new electives, new course offerings, and ways to enrich the Upper School academics and Judaic studies to truly meet the 21st Century Learning demands that our students will need.

I look forward to sharing more as the summer approaches.

Stay tuned!

L'shalom.

Yom HaShoah.



April 20, 2017
24 Nissan 5777

Dear AJA Community,

It was my first Pesach as an “Atlantan” and Florence, the children and I had a joyous chag. I hope you and your families had the same. As I mentioned recently, Pesach is such an important holiday, in that we look back at our “story”, our struggle and history to always keep our past alive for ourselves and the future generations. This Monday, April 24 (28 Nissan) marks another important date that as Jews we should always remember.

Yom HaShoah. Holocaust Remembrance Day. A day where we commemorate the six million Jews who perished in the Holocaust. That number still gives me chills every time I read it. The Talmud tells us that “Whoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world.” On Monday, we commemorate the beautiful souls who perished. We do this so that we may keep their stories, their tragic struggles and their holy legacies alive.

Did you know that the full name of the day is “Yom Hashoah ve-laG’vurah”? יום הזיכרון לשואה ולגבורה – literally meaning “Day of (Remembrance of) the Holocaust and the Heroism.” That word ולגבורה (*heroism*) is one that is not always included when we talk of Yom HaShoah. Not only does the word Heroism refer to those Jews who demonstrated amazing resilience and strength, but also to those valiant Jews and non-Jews whose bravery and heroism most likely saved hundreds of thousands from perishing. We recall all of these heroes on 4/24.

At AJA, we will recognize Yom HaShoah at both campuses. We are encouraging our students and staff to wear white tops to honor the day. Our Upper School students will participate in a special assembly, where they will see artistic and musical presentations about children who who perished in the Holocaust. At the Northland Drive Campus, our middle schoolers will participate in a program that will focus on the 1.5 million children who died, including a moment of silence in remembrance.

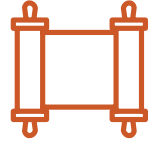
In Atlanta, the 52nd Annual Community Wide Holocaust Commemoration will be held at Greenwood Cemetery on Sunday, April 23 at 11:00 am. Holocaust survivor and Dunwoody resident Manuela Mendels Bornstein, originally from France, will speak about her Parisian neighbors who saved her and her family during this horrific time. The Bremen Museum will also have their Holocaust exhibition open to the public for free from 10:00 am - 5:00 pm.

It is not an easy day. It is not a happy day. But it is one of the most important days in our lives as Jews. On this day, we look to the past, we honor and we pay respects to our ancestors whose lives were tragically extinguished over 80 years ago.

May their memories continue to be a blessing.

L’shalom.

Reflection and Progression.



April 27, 2017

1 Iyyar 5777

Dear AJA Community,

Many of our recent holidays are about looking back with sadness and reflection. This includes Yom HaZikaron, Israel Memorial Day, on 4/30. We will remember the soldiers who gave their lives to build and preserve the freedom of the State of Israel, together with memorializing the victims of terror who gave their lives for Israel.

On Monday, 5/1 at the Northland Drive campus, there will be a ceremony, led by the 8th graders at 8:35 am in the auditorium. We will have a memorial ceremony at 12:45 pm in the Upper School Beit Midrash. Students will read related texts, and El malei rachamim. They will meet Israeli consulate reps and hear from special guest speakers, Gad and Chana Levy, bereaved parents of Shilo Levi z"l - a fallen soldier from the helicopter disaster in 1997, who was 21 when he died. (Gad and Chana are also speaking to our 6th - 8th graders tomorrow, 4/28). We encourage all students to wear white uniform shirts and dark bottoms on 5/1 in honor of the day.

At sundown, on 5/1 we look back at the past - and this time we celebrate! It is Yom Ha'atzmaut and we recognize the establishment of the modern state of Israel in 1948 - Israel Independence Day. In Israel, our friends there will take to the streets in celebration as soon as the sun sets. There will be parties, music, fireworks - it is an incredible time. The next day, on the actual holiday, Israelis gather at Mount Herzl in Jerusalem. A ceremony with speeches and a parade of soldiers concludes with the lighting of twelve torches, representing the 12 Tribes of Israel. I wish we could all be there to see it in person.

We will do our best to recreate the joy and celebration of the holiday, here in Atlanta. In keeping with AJA tradition, on Tuesday, 5/2 our 7th grade students will be performing the *Daglanut*, flag dance, on Yom Haatzmaut for the Northland Campus. Even though parents won't be in attendance, Rabbi Adam Starr of Young Israel of Toco Hills has offered us a special opportunity. Our students will give a repeat performance at the YITH Yom Haatzmaut celebration, which all parents are welcome to attend.

The YITH celebration begins at 5:00 pm and the *Daglanut* will take place at the beginning of the celebration. We hope to see many of you there!

While I'm on the subject of Israel, I am very happy to introduce you to our newest Shlichim, Matan and Galia Magen. They will be joining us from Israel starting next year to teach at the Lower School. We are excited about this new addition to our AJA Family, and welcome the Matan, Galia and their three precious daughters to Atlanta.

So many highs and lows and a range of emotions starting this Sunday night - but that is part of the beauty of Judaism. We embrace each other during the sad times and celebrate together when we are able. We look forward to sharing these important days with your children next week.

L'shalom.



Why Are We Here?

May 4, 2017

8th Iyyar 5777

Dear AJA Community,

This week and last solidified for me (and hopefully, to many of you) why we are here. Why we have this school. Why we are a Modern Orthodox Day school. Why we are so proud of our role as a cornerstone of Jewish education in Atlanta. As we observed the events of Yom Hashoah, Yom HaZikaron & Yom Ha'atzmaut - watching the hard work unfold from our dedicated and talented Hebrew staff, our Shlichim, our US Student Council and our B'not Sherut - it clearly answered my "why?".

Ultimately, the reason we are all placed on this Earth is to partner with Hashem. Sharing the gift of *tzedakah*, raising our children, fulfilling mitzvot, demonstrating middot to our friends and neighbors, or just simply, doing what is right. All around us, there are opportunities to literally partner with G-d to do holy things in this world, and to treat all lives (and each other) as holy. It is what Parashat Achrei-Mot Kedoshim tells us this week...we are all holy, as created by G-d.

קְדָשִׁים תִּהְיוּ כִּי קָדוֹשׁ אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם

You shall be holy, for I, Hashem your G-d, am holy. (Vayikra 19:2)

I believe that the best way to bring this to life for the children at AJA, is through our mission: teaching them commitment to the Love of Torah, Love of Israel and the Jewish people, and doing this all in a nurturing, inclusive and loving community.

As the events of the last two weeks unfolded - Yom Hashoah - Yom HaZikaron - Yom Ha'atzmaut (Lower School, Upper School) - I watched our students of all ages gain an understanding of our history, our challenges as Jews, and how they each have a unique role as a chain from the past to the future. They learned about *kavod* (respect) and honor for those who were killed in the Shoah, or defending Medinat Yisrael. It was moving to see the children ride the emotional wave between each of the very different days. They davened, sang, danced and celebrated in front of their peers, their teachers and members of our community. The Hebrew teachers, US Student Council, Shlichim and B'not Sherut turned every corner of both campuses into a tangible reflection of our love for Israel and pride in AJA. It was evident how important these days were for the children, and the connection they felt to their heritage.

This week was also about community. Watching all the parent volunteers, who, during Teacher Appreciation Week, showered our teachers and staff with such authentic gestures of gratitude - it was incredible. It reiterated to me, that we ALL understand **this AJA journey is about our children**, their future and their connection to community and Judaism...and our parents get it. Special thanks to all of you who contributed time and energy to thank our teachers all week. It meant a lot to everyone here.

As we move closer to Shabbat, I encourage you to talk to your children about what they learned this week at Yom HaZikaron and Yom Ha'atzmaut and how it helped them cement their connection to our heritage, and our land, Israel. I guarantee they will have some special stories to tell.

L'shalom.





The Future at AJA.

May 11, 2017

15 Iyyar 5777

Dear AJA Community,

I've often been asked what I view as the keys to being a successful school. That is the easiest question I'm ever asked...because the answer is simple.

"Education without vision is like a present without a future."

Professor Pinchas Shifman, Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Let me elaborate. In order to create the best academic environment for our children, where they will learn and grow and develop into the ideal AJA graduates, these are the essential components:

1. Have a clear answer to the "*why*" we are here
2. Always keep an eye on the mission and plan for the school
3. Nurture and support highly-talented educators, faculty and staff and place them in roles where they will be the most successful

So, I'm here to say...done. done. and done.

I am BEYOND thrilled to send this email. After exhaustive searches, endless meetings and lengthy discussions, I have solidified a team that will strengthen AJA (an ECD - 12th Grade Modern Orthodox school) and bring us to the 21st Century through the educational philosophy I've been speaking of since I joined the AJA family. We will continue to develop the AJA culture of warmth, middot, academic excellence (in both Judaic and General Studies), and social emotional growth - with the solid and meaningful connection to Israel and to Torah that we've been continuing to nurture.

I couldn't be more proud to announce the following updates:

Instructional Leaders

As you will see, there are some new additions to the school leadership team to work closely with our already strong current Instructional Leaders. Many of you met Rabbi Houben last weekend at the Town Hall. Take a look to see the exceptional team we now have in place:

Debbie Bornstein - Lower & Middle School Judaic Studies

Rabbi Allan Houben - Upper School Judaic Studies

Diane Marks - M'silot K - 4th Grade

Dr. Missy Rivner - Middle School

Joel Rojek - Upper School General Studies

Leah Summers - ECD & Lower School General Studies

John Wilson - Upper School

The Future at AJA.

Executive Director - Franeen Sarif

We are deeply grateful that Franeen was able to seamlessly step in as Interim Middle School Lead! Although she was simultaneously serving as our Executive Director, now she is able to focus on that role 100%.

I'd also like this opportunity to thank Sylvia Miller and Pam Mason for their behind-the-scenes efforts to insure the social-emotional well being of your children.

The newest updates:

John Wilson will be stepping up as the Upper School instructional leader. He already has been working with the Upper School on an almost daily basis, so this is a natural transition for him. He will continue to parlay his strengths as a teacher, administrator and school leader into his new role. John already has solid connections with our Upper School teachers, faculty and staff - which will be an asset as we transition to One AJA in August on our shared campus!

Missy Rivner worked this year very closely with our Middle Schoolers as the Library Learning Commons (LLC) Specialist. She brings not only her technology strength and 21st Century Learning Skills, but also a solid connection to the children. She'll be working closely with Franeen on the transition this summer, and I know she is excited to get started in her new role as soon as she can.

What about the LLC, you may ask? That is a top priority for me. I'm already working with Missy and John on a plan to continue efforts in creating a LLC that is in line with our vision, where students become more content producers than content consumers. I'll communicate that update this summer.

With this team in place, I am confident that the 2017-18 school year and beyond will be incredible! Please join me in congratulating our Instructional Leaders for the new school year. Your children and their Jewish educational journey are in the best possible hands, and I couldn't be more excited.

L'shalom.

Doors Closing, Doors Opening.



May 18, 2017

22 Iyyar 5777

Dear AJA Community,

The ebbs and flows of a school year, this is the season of transition. As we move from the more serious mourning aspects of the Omer to the countdown to celebrate Shavuot, we also experience a transition with our students.

There is something bittersweet about the final days of a school year (although I know the children would disagree with the “bitter” piece!). It’s now time to say “farewell” and time to say “what’s next?”. We can all hear the simultaneous sounds of doors closing and doors opening.

Next Tuesday, at our Upper School graduation ceremony (we hope you can join us), we will say goodbye to some outstanding and special students, to young men and women that our talented staff have heavily invested in over the past many years. And, though I’ve been a Head of School for quite sometime, I can tell you that saying goodbye to students never gets any easier. At this time of mixed emotions, I do love the beautiful symmetry that occurs organically. We send off our Seniors to the next adventure, and can also take comfort in knowing that in a just a few months, they will find their new exciting next steps...whether in Israel or here in the states at a College or University. We will also welcome a brand new group of eager, curious, motivated and amazing freshmen to start the whole process anew. Beautiful Symmetry.

This past Shabbat, I joined the Upper School students at their year end Shabbaton. I continue to be awed by the leadership and dedication of our Student Council who prepared a robust Shabbat program which included Tefillah, singing, musical Havdalah, dancing, dancing and more dancing. (oh, did I mention the dancing?). There was one particular moment that moved me. The chaperones were trying to get davening started, but we couldn’t because we simply couldn’t stop kids from dancing and celebrating Shabbat. They were truly happy to be with each other. Watching our Seniors study Torah together, on what was most likely their last group experience, was both inspiring and emotional. This is the tension of this time of year at a school. Doors closing. Doors opening.

As we close the door on another academic year, and offer our best wishes and mazel tov to the AJA Class of 2017, we are also opening our door for our 2017-18 school year. We are happy to report unprecedented growth in our younger grades! I am so confident this will be a year of amazing learning, continued incredible teaching and please G-d - for all AJA students - lots and lots of dancing!

Wishing all the best to the graduating Seniors and remember that MY door is always open.

קִנְיָן-חֵכְמָה מֵחֵטָב יִקְנֹת בִּינָה נְבָחַר מִכֶּסֶף

How much better to acquire wisdom than gold;

To acquire understanding is preferable to silver. (*Mishlei* / Proverbs 16:16)

Mazel tov!

L’shalom.



May 25, 2017

29 Iyyar 5777

Dear AJA Community,

What a week! You'd think the last week of the school year would be uneventful - winding down, packing up and tying up loose ends. Well, not so much at AJA. We've been busy! There is a theme to all of the amazing events that happened at AJA starting this past Monday, and it is: **קשר Kesher - Connection(s)**. I was struck at how AJA connects with Atlanta Jewish history and continues to connect on so many levels even today. Let me elaborate.

It all started with a bang at our special annual Jerry Siegel Legacy Golf Tournament. This event is held in honor of former AJA President of the Board Jerry Siegel z"l. Not only was Jerry involved at the school, but his children and grandchildren were students, and his son, Michael, is finishing up his final term on the AJA Board. The tournament honored two wonderful ladies, Judy Stolovitz and Nancy Weissmann. Both women watched their children grow through the schools (GHA and YA) and Nancy and Judy each eventually served as Board Presidents. On the course and the court, we were surrounded by current parents, board members of alumni, grandparents of current and past students. You get the idea. I even saw a couple of "vintage" GHA/YA shirts on some of the attendees. **קשר**

Tuesday, we welcomed a very special guest to AJA. Students connected with Shoah Survivor, Martin Lowenberg, who was here to address both the 12th and 8th graders at their respective ceremonies. Your children greeted Mr. Lowenberg with incredible middot and respect, as they stood when he entered the room. He encouraged the children to be proud to be Jews, and to always remember that sense of pride. Incredible advice from a courageous man. Mr. Lowenberg created a special mezuzah for the inside entrance to our new Upper School, placed on a wood base that was reclaimed from a German railway car that transported Jews to concentration camps. In addition to the legacy project the children created, this mezuzah was the graduation gift from the 8th graders to the school. (*Todah Rabah!*) **קשר**

Tuesday night, the Graduation was incredible. We watched as the Class of 2017 moved from strength to strength onto their next steps of their journey (21 out of 23 are headed to Israel or to the army)! These children have grown up at AJA (or GHA/YA) and their parents and grandparents have a history here, too. Our guest speaker from the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta, Joanne Birnbrey, even shared that her family has had students enrolled at GHA/YA/AJA for 60 years! That amounts to 31 students who have walked these halls (and more to come, as the next generation is now here in our ECD!) Many of our graduation speakers are following the footsteps of their parents and grandparents and older siblings who were students. I know we'll see these young men and women back here - as parents of their own AJA students one day - in a later step of their journeys. **קשר**

On Wednesday, our 8th Graders took the stage for their Recognition Ceremony. These young men and women will be the first Freshman class to start at the new Upper School campus (and whoa, is it going to be amazing)! In the audience, there were siblings, parents and grandparents - all here to celebrate this milestone for their students. I saw board members past and present, parents who are school alums and grandparents who helped create our school. Afterward at the reception, I was amazed at the range of ages there to celebrate these students - it was incredibly moving to me. **קשר**

One final connection piece, before we close the door on this school year. **Welcome to the Dan Family** - Amir, Tali and their children, Noa, Matan, Ohad, Adi and baby Itay - who will be joining our AJA Family as our newest Shlichim! Our AJA Shlichim are such an important part of our connection to Eretz Yisrael, and we are excited for the Dan Family to arrive. **קשר**

Friends, the Upper School has finished exams, and the end of the school year is officially tomorrow for the Northland Drive Campus. In a few short months (don't worry...I'm not rushing away the summer) we will all be together as ONE AJA on the Northland Drive Campus. I simply cannot wait. I look forward to seeing all ages under one roof, enjoying our school programs and celebrations with all the generations. I'm ready to start building more memories as we enjoy the next chapter of AJA together.

Over the summer, I won't be sending a weekly Thursday Thoughts email. I will, however, be back in touch soon, as we finish preparation for the new school year. Wishing you all a safe and fun summer, filled with meaningful time with your wonderful children. Thanks for sharing them with us during the school year!

L'shalom.



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