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Well-Educated and Ethical

Column by Dr. Ray Levi, Head of School

A number of current parents joined Abbe Payton and me at a coffee for prospective parents earlier this week. The group included a father new to MJDS this year, a mother whose students had transferred from public school, and parents with students in middle and upper grades. We began the session by asking the parents of students presently enrolled to describe what they see as the most significant elements of the MJDS experience. Their responses included:

- The ease of transition from early childhood programs to MJDS, characterized by the warmth of the kindergarten and the sense of community;
- The opportunity for children to remain children for a longer period;
- The attention to individual needs so that children don't fall between the cracks; and
- The supportiveness that children demonstrate for one another in their classes and across the grades.

Interestingly, each of the comments focused on values and community. "It's not that we don't care about academic achievement. It's really important to my husband and me," one mother commented. "But it is the community that the children are observing and experiencing that is unique about MJDS."

The relationship between academics and values is an important one. From my perspective, you can only develop ethical stances in an environment that is content-rich. You can only teach critical thinking skills when you have real problems to assess. You can only examine your values when you're wrestling with real ethical dilemmas. Wonderful opportunities for raising questions and examining alternative stances arise in our daily living, and also as we read literature, study Torah, and learn about political decisions.

This relationship was underscored for me as I read an article in the current issue of *Independent School* by David Orr, a professor of environmental studies and politics at Oberlin College. His concern is that some of the most problematic decisions in our world are being

made by people who earn considerable incomes, are the products of the best universities, and are readers. These people are primarily focused on "the great fear...that we will not be able to produce as many automobiles, DVD players, digital TVs, or supercomputers as the Japanese or Europeans." Orr observes the potential dangers of what are often described as good educational programs. He writes, "There are three [dangers] that are particularly consequential for the way we live on the earth: (1) that formal education will cause students to worry about how to make a living before they know who they are, (2) that it will render students narrow technicians who are morally sterile, and (3) that it will deaden their sense of wonder for the created world."

As I read this material, I considered how carefully we have worked to avoid these potential dangers. A fundamental thrust of our program involves helping students understand who they are by examining their cultural and religious roots and establishing deep connections to their religious traditions. Our commitment to core values, to looking at texts from multiple perspectives, and to exposing students to a range of world cultures is designed to help our children understand the moral implications of their decisions. Our focus on inquiry, our exploration of nature in parks, our study of the visual arts and music, and our examination of t'fillot and brahot (blessings) all help preserve that amazing sense of wonder that our kindergarteners bring to the start of their formal educational experience.

The comments of our current parents at the coffee earlier this week emphasize that this balance between a rigorous, content-rich curriculum and a program that examines the ethical dimensions of daily living is greatly valued. They don't believe that MJDS graduates will look like people who have experienced the dangers that Orr describes. Rather, both parents and educators at MJDS share the perspective that truly well-educated children have a strong sense of who they are and view the world through moral lenses.