



A PUBLICATION
OF THE MINNEAPOLIS
JEWISH DAY SCHOOL

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קשר

January 29, 2005 | 19 Shevat, 5765

Small Student Gestures Reflect the Values We Teach

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One of the challenges of my job is to maintain perspective. Often, when my day has been filled with meetings, I visit the dining room to spend time with students. As you know, I see the lunch period as an opportunity for many teachable moments. So, I've discovered, do the children.

Recently I joined two second-graders at their lunch table. One student was a boy who had recently visited my office, and I was seeking an informal and positive interaction with him. As I sat down, this boy turned to me and said, "Do you know that some people believe that, when bad people die, they go to hell?" "Yes," I replied, "but that's not exactly the Jewish concept of what happens after death." "Well," the boy continued, "I guess all Jewish people have a chance of going to heaven." Then, absorbed in his thoughts, he turned to his friend and said, "You know, when I was little, I used to think that heaven was this blue space with clouds floating around, but now..." With all the wisdom of seven-year-olds, the boys exchanged ideas about how their concepts had changed as they matured. After a few moments, the second boy turned to me and asked, "Do you know why dinosaurs are hardly referred to in *Bereshit*?" "Why?" I asked, knowing that there would be a theory offered. "Well," said this young man, "we don't really know how long a day was back in the time of creation. So, it's possible that a day was long enough for dinosaurs to have been created and to have become extinct." I am sure my mouth dropped open. It was not simply the sophistication of the ideas being offered. It was that significant theological questions were the topic of lunch table conversation among second-graders. I am certainly aware that not every discussion at lunch is profound. These boys are quite capable of being silly. (Remember, one had recently paid a visit to my office.) Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that these young students see such a topic as perfectly normal.

For me, this conversation embodies the reason for choosing a Jewish day school education. Theological philosophy can be integrated with discussions about basketball and movies and recess games. This informal interaction also serves as a measure of the quality of the MJDS experience, as it offers a window on the depth of thinking being encouraged and suggests that ideas raised in classrooms are being applied in other settings without any prompting

from a teacher. Certainly, the words of Rabbi Shimon from *Pirkei Avot* resonate: "Three who have eaten at one table and have spoken words of Torah, Scripture states, 'He said to me, this table is in the presence of God.'" (*Pirkei Avot* 3:3 with excerpt from *Ezekiel* 41:22).

Coincidentally, this conversation was framed by two incidents that also suggested the ways in which students are internalizing values. Often, the dining room serves as a forum for teachers to remind children about collective responsibility, particularly about leaving tables and floors clean. I had come into the dining room as the kindergarten was cleaning up. One boy came up to me and pointed to a mess on the floor, saying, "I just spilled my peaches when I was throwing them away." His concern wasn't about the syrup that had soaked his sweatshirt and dribbled down his pants. Rather, at a moment when he might have focused on his own discomfort or simply walked away, he'd come to take ownership and get help. Similarly, at the end of the grade 1-2 lunch period, a girl spilled some goldfish crackers on the floor. Again, rather than walk away, she was painstakingly collecting them, risking a shower of food from schoolmates emptying their trays into the garbage can just above her head. How often, I wondered, do I miss moments like this? How often do we look for these small gestures that reflect the values we teach being applied by young children who are seeking no external reward? I know I don't look often enough. But perhaps, when we do, we will more frequently discover the presence of God.

