Lessons from Mezuzah about Redefining Success in Day Schools
AS WE MERITED TO MAKE THE JOURNEY FROM SLAVERY TO FREEDOM, FROM THE CONSTRAINTS WITHIN EGYPT TO THE FREEDOM AND CHALLENGE OF EVOLVING INTO A NATION, IT IS INCUMBENT UPON US TO UTILIZE THIS JOURNEY’S MESSAGE TO ITS FULLEST. THE PASSOVER STORY INFORMS OUR WORK IN JEWISH EDUCATION. FROM OUR RAW BEGINNINGS AS A PEOPLE, WHAT LESSON CAN WE DRAW THAT CAN DIRECT US IN OUR MISSION TO PREPARE FUTURE GENERATIONS OF JEWS IN THE DEEPEST AND MOST MEANINGFUL WAY POSSIBLE?

There is a remarkable piece in God’s method of preparing the Jews to leave Egypt. God commands every Jew to take a lamb into his home for four days, then slaughter it and mark the doorpost of the house with its blood, resulting in the Passover sacrifice. With thoughtful reading of this text, we can see how this act, which left the Jews who performed it exposed to the scrutiny of their Egyptians neighbors, required a deep trust in God. This explains the assertion in Midrash Rabbah that most of the Jews remained and assimilated, with only a minority following God’s word and then leaving Egypt.

We recognize this marking of the doorpost as the first mezuzah. Before the law came down to mark each of our homes with the declaration of God’s oneness, Jewish souls were challenged to have the courage to distinguish their homes. The specified mark is not subtle, but a bold, emphatic statement using an Egyptian deity, risking potentially
life-threatening retribution from their oppressors. God clearly had an eternal message in this, and it applies to us today. Demonstrating bold and fearless distinction—separating ourselves, our homes and our institutions—has enabled our survival throughout the ages. Beginning with a mark of blood on their doors, the Jews who exited Egypt created a unique nation of people capable of sustainability against all odds. Distinction has been the eternal glue of the Jewish people, even as we were scattered to all four corners of the earth. God said to “mark your houses” because what you hold inside, the values that infuse your families, is the gift that will distinguish you for all time and ensure your survival.

Jewish educators are partners with the holiest institution since the Holy Temple: the Jewish home. Many Jews, perhaps the vast majority, have no idea that the home is, in fact, holier even than the synagogue. Every Jewish home has the potential to instill the Jewish identity and values that sustain the Jewish people. The Jewish institutions that we devote ourselves to are the extensions of the home. Schools are not a substitute but an essential limb of the home and community. When families choose to entrust their children’s education and direct their dollars to Jewish day schools, they expect an experience that is distinct in its mission and implementation.

Jewish day school leaders can glean several key takeaways from the significance of mezuzah and the Jewish home to position schools favorably in advocating for support and partnerships from stakeholders.

**Connect how you convey Judaics with the ultimate goals of Jewish education.** The root of mezuzah is שָׁיֵא, to move. Our ability to maintain our uniqueness even as we move outside of our homes is simply a reality that has resulted in our unlikely survival and vitality. This means our success in educating Jewishly is directly related to our expression of distinct values. We have an obligation to convey to our children that Judaic studies is distinct from general studies. The Jewish institutions that we devote ourselves to are the extensions of the home. Schools are not a substitute but an essential limb of the home and community. When families choose to entrust their children’s education and direct their dollars to Jewish day schools, they expect an experience that is distinct in its mission and implementation. It only stands to reason that the way we engage with our students in Judaics is the way they receive and ultimately live it. And sadly, the choices we often make are not connecting those dots.

**Partner with organizations to engage the home—and entire community.** The home, after all, houses literally everyone, including the stakeholders who directly fuel Jewish day schools. Few day schools have focused resources on parent engagement, and even fewer of those have cracked the code on how to make it work well. It’s a challenging nut to crack. Perhaps school-by-school parent engagement may not be the way to go. My husband, Louis, and I, among a growing number of philanthropists, encourage community partnerships that leverage each organization’s strengths. Why should this be any different? Instead of trying to create parent-education programs, perhaps schools need to reach out to existing organizations that are successful in adult education and engagement, to forge partnerships that address the needs of their school community. In this way, all stakeholders in the school are included, from parents to funders to influencers, without schools trying to be something they are not.

**Make it a responsibility to commit to self-evaluations as individuals and day schools.** In my work with JEIC (Jewish Education Innovation Challenge) in its first five years, we have prioritized catalyzing the field and developing new models of transmitting our holy subjects. What is clear is that it is time to move into a phase of being serious about implementation and evaluation. How are the decisions we make influencing the students we serve? Are the policies, structure and evaluations conveying what we want to convey about Jewish studies and resulting in meeting the unique goals of a Jewish day school? Have we drifted from our tradition of rewarding effort into the trappings of rewarding results coming from outside the Jewish world? And most crucially, how can we develop school and community cultures that reflect the values we want to instill in our students?

**Reconsider the use of grades in Judaic studies.** It is inconsistent with Jewish wisdom to critically judge a Jew’s ability to learn Torah subjects by peer comparison or results-based evaluation. What we know for sure is that the Torah is accessible to everyone, “each according to his way.” The goal of building Jewish self-esteem is obvious. However, we cannot build this crucial internal muscle if we ascribe it to an evaluative process rooted in rewarding results instead of effort and resilience. We are feeling these results, painfully with every student who graduates without a lifelong love of Jewish learning. We are doing a huge disservice to the future of our nation by imitating a system of factory-model evaluation developed for subjects like math and history. Those subjects don’t cut to the core of a person’s identity. They aren’t subjects unique to a people with a responsibility to distinguish themselves among nations. Secular subjects don’t directly inform the values that build a home or a marriage. They don’t necessarily affect morals or ethical behavior. They don’t build future Jewish leaders.

Our success is reflected in the happiness and well-being of our graduates, not their job titles or income levels. As Jewish educators, our job first and foremost is to instill positive Jewish identity and passion that solidly informs how our graduates operate in the world, both ethically and courageously. While textual study is important, this is a “both, and” imperative. Memorizing that page of text is important, but not at the expense of the student’s self-esteem or the priority to instill a love of learning. We also must identify positive Jewish mentors to help our students develop their internal selves and their relationship with God, as well as their intellect.

It took an unimaginable amount of courage for those Jews in Egypt to take the blood of an Egyptian deity and paint it on their doorposts because God said so. Courage is essential for change and transformation. I attended the AIPAC policy conference in March and was touched by the words of Nikki Haley, US ambassador to the United Nations. She said, “The most important thing is to not be afraid to stick with the fundamental principles, even when they go against entrenched customs. Some of those outdated customs have gone unquestioned for years.”

Ambassador Haley presents a courage that is both greatly admirable and shocking. To dare to buck the status quo and think independently, while unique in politics, is in our Jewish DNA. We have had to reach inside the depths of our souls to courageously remain true to who we are in the face of the most extreme forms of adversity and temptations to assimilate. If we can access this courage as leaders—instead of being followers—in the education world, we will enable our future generations to fulfill their Jewish mission in this world.