

Shabbat Parashat Vayishlah
Loving-kindness is Good for the Heart and Soul

On Tuesday morning, faculty members from the five Jewish day schools in Greater Vancouver gathered together for a most enlightening and enriching professional development day. By now, I am sure many of you have heard about Dr. Wendy Mogel and her message about raising resilient children. She served as our first keynote speaker and was most engaging and entertaining. After a short break, the gathered educators heard a presentation by our second keynote speaker, Dr. Kimberly Schonert-Reichl, an Applied Developmental Psychologist and Associate Professor at UBC, entitled “Educating the Heart.” Her message spoke to the essence of what it means to experience fully Jewish education in a Jewish day school. Most schools have a clear focus on the cognitive and intellectual development of students. Children must learn certain bodies of knowledge and skills in order to find success as they go on to advanced education and careers. Dr. Schonert-Reichl argues, however, that schools who do not also focus on the education of the heart are only doing part of their job and are actually costing their students their greatest opportunity to live up to their fullest potential. Her research has shown that teaching and learning about and then performing acts of loving-kindness lead to greater physical health of the heart and body and open students up to more engaged academic learning. Education of the mind, heart, and soul are the bedrock of Jewish day school education and are an outgrowth of Torah.

In this week’s *parasha*, we read of two of the greatest acts of loving-kindness in the entire Torah. After twenty years apart, Jacob and Esau are about to be reunited. As you may recall from the Torah portion of two weeks ago, Jacob was forced to run away from home in order to escape his older twin Esau’s rage at his having stolen his blessing from their father Isaac. When Jacob learns in this week’s Torah portion that during his family’s journey home they will cross paths with Esau and his family, he is terrified. He creates an elaborate plan to divide his family into two camps (in case Esau’s family attacks) and to offer gifts and peace offerings to Esau in order to, hopefully, smooth the way to their reunion. In the end, it turns out that none of these plans were necessary. Esau lovingly embraces his brother, having clearly put their past behind him and forgiven him. This forgiveness is our first act of loving-kindness. At the end of the Torah portion, we learn that Isaac has passed away and Esau and Jacob – together – take care of their father’s burial. This is the second act of *hesed*, and a mitzvah which many Rabbis say is the greatest kindness of all because it is one that can never be repaid by the one who received it.

Performing acts of loving-kindness is an expression of Jewish values that have deep roots in our tradition and our people’s story. We are commanded to show love and kindness because it is the right thing to do and because there are people in our world around us that are truly and genuinely in need of them. On

Tuesday morning, I learned of what might actually be a scientific/medical imperative to perform acts of loving-kindness, since regular volunteering was proven to lead to increased heart health in a group of students that participated in a study conducted by Dr. Schonert-Reichl. Science and Torah combining to offer compelling cases for making hesed parts of our regular routine.

In light of the importance of educating the heart and soul of the child and offering meaningful opportunities to perform acts of loving-kindness, each of our Grade 7 classes has chosen and adopted a Tikkun Olam (repair of the world) project for the year. 7A will be working to collect food for the Jewish Food Bank. 7B will be conducting a second-hand prescription glasses drive in order to give the gift of sight to those who cannot afford needed eyewear. 7C will be working to prepare food to be distributed at a local soup kitchen.

We hope that our entire community will partner with our student leaders in our graduating class to assist them with their projects. This week, the Jewish Food Bank is calling on us for donations of cooking oil, applesauce, and latke mix. We will be collecting through Wednesday, November 20th. Every item will make a huge difference! Please watch and listen for information about our used glasses drive in the coming days and weeks.

Shabbat Shalom!