

Day Schools and DEI: A Parent's Perspective



BEING A MOTHER of four children is a wonderful thing that naturally has its challenges. So is being a mom of four children who happen to be Russian, Black, *and* Jewish. Since our kids were young, they've been well aware that they would face bigotry. My husband and I

have countered attempts to exclude or diminish them by instilling in them an unfettered sense of pride, a deep knowledge of their identities, and a nuanced understanding of the world around them.

Along the way, enrolling them in several Jewish day schools—we're a military family that has moved around a lot—has offered a consistent base of support. These schools were essential in teaching our children never to feel ashamed of their Jewishness.

And so much more.

- The necessity to excel in both secular and Judaic studies at Jewish day schools establishes an atmosphere where academic excellence isn't just possible. It's expected.

- Learning Hebrew isn't just about fulfilling a random foreign-language requirement. It provides a vital connection between the students, their history and culture, and the modern State of Israel.
- Studying Israeli history isn't just a lesson in civics, democracy, economic development, environmental sustainability, military strategy, diplomacy, and self-defense. It's a case study in one of the most successful indigenous movements of all time.
- Researching Torah isn't just about memorizing biblical verses. It's about looking at divergent interpretations and learning how to debate and disagree.
- Attending school with Jewish students and faculty isn't just about sharing a common bond of peoplehood. It's about investigating forms of diversity that are more than skin deep.

Over the years, day schools have held my kids to high expectations in the classroom, while also holding them in comfort in times of mourning. These schools have fed the kids when they forgot their lunches at home, hugged them when they skinned their knees, and made them apologize when they were in the wrong.

The love I hold for these schools is little short of intense. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks *z"l* spoke not only for me and my family but also for every minority community with high aspirations for itself when he wrote, "Freedom begins with what we teach our children. This is why Jews became a people whose passion is education, whose heroes are teachers and whose citadels are schools."

Which is why current trends in certain Jewish day schools so alarm me.

In recent years I've seen a worrying shift away from the things that make Jewish education so valuable. The murder of George Floyd by a white police officer in 2020 sparked a summer of upheaval,

chaos, and a broad national reckoning with unresolved racial tensions. All of this had a profound impact on the programming of many Jewish day schools.

Some of the new initiatives were overdue. The topic of racial identity, once ignored, generated new conversations. Students were able to express their opinions on racial perceptions, some based on accent, country of birth, and immigration status. My kids felt comfortable discussing their experiences with racial profiling, both within Jewish spaces and outside of them. I also appreciated seeing day schools seek to make non-Ashkenazi Jews feel more welcome. Part of education is social learning, and I was encouraged to see children raise important questions, offer personal disclosures, and engage in open-minded debates.

Not all of the conversations, however, have been so open-minded. Disagreements could sometimes devolve into denunciations. Racialized and polarizing terminology inimical to Jewish traditions, such as “white Jews” and “Jews of color,” not only became commonplace but also fostered divisions where they hadn’t previously existed. Ideas or statements that went against the new ideological grain were—as my own kids and some of their peers soon discovered—muted or suppressed.

The Jewish Institute for Liberal Values, where I am the director of education and community engagement, recently conducted a study of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives at Jewish day schools. The study looked at 7 Orthodox, 17 Modern Orthodox, 8 Conservative, and 24 uncategorized/pluralistic day schools, examining evidence of DEI programming. Terms commonly used by critical theorists were deployed to determine whether these schools were implementing DEI. We found three main influences driving these programs.

First, day-school funders increased financial support for these schools in order to bring in DEI consultants to work with administrators and educators to create “antiracist” schools. Second, an idea influenced by a Pew study and the Jewish Community Federation

Ideas or statements that went against the new ideological grain were—as my own kids and some of their peers soon discovered—muted or suppressed.

and Endowment Fund’s (Bay Area) “culture of belonging” program took hold—that diversity funding was necessitated by the increasing racial diversity of day schools. And third, organizations that support day schools began to require DEI programming in a way that was meant to make it not just supplemental to the schools’ missions, but central to them.

Many day schools, however, may not have fully appreciated what they were getting themselves into. Let’s look at these points in turn.

Antiracism: Contrary to what seems implied by the term, it does not denote opposition to racism (at least as most people understand the concept of racism). If anything, antiracist pedagogy leads to something closer to the opposite: the institutionalization of preferential practices based on overtly racial criteria. As Boston University’s Ibram X. Kendi, the country’s leading antiracist theoretician, has put it: “The only remedy to racist discrimination is antiracist discrimination. The only remedy to past discrimination is present discrimination. The only remedy to present discrimination is future discrimination.”

For Jewish schools, this kind of thinking is profoundly problematic on multiple levels. It means acknowledging a history of Jewish complicity with racism even when no such history exists—in other words, confessing to a crime that was never committed. It also means teaching concepts such as “privilege”—whether political,

economic, or racial—that have long been used to persecute Jews. Even one of my own children was faced with chants of “acknowledge your privilege” when he spoke up and disagreed with ideology about Jewish privilege, never mind that two of his grandparents had fled persecution in the Soviet Union and two others in the Jim Crow South. The scene might almost have been comical if its implications weren’t so troubling.

Racial diversity: In 2019, a study suggested that between 12 and 15 percent of American Jews qualified as “Jews of color.” That study has been sharply contested by Jewish demographers who conclude the figure is closer to 6 percent. But whatever the true number, it adds impetus to the idea that day schools needed to do more about questions of racial diversity in their own student body, including through such measures as “diversifying” curricula based on the kind of racial criteria beloved by many DEI consultants.

But the problem with this kind of diversity, focused as it is on skin color, is that it obscures the kind that ought to matter most to Jewish day schools: Jewish diversity in all of its rich cultural, linguistic, religious, geographic, and historical varieties. At our Passover seder, my family includes Ethiopian soft matzah. When exploring music on Israeli radio, my sons and their friends have focused on Mizrahi music and its embrace by Israeli pop culture after years of being kept mostly underground. Shouldn’t these—and so many others I could mention—be the types of diversity that ought to preoccupy Jewish educators, as opposed to the trendier ones based solely on the color of someone’s skin?

DEI programming: Even if one accepts that day schools should incorporate at least some elements of a DEI program, the speed with which they have done so has been stunning. Has the substance of these programs been thoroughly vetted and thoughtfully researched? Are its effects on community cohesion, or the quality of overall education, well understood? Has there been robust

consultation with all stakeholders—particularly parents? And have dissenting views been truly taken into account? Has thought been given to some of the possible unintended consequences, such as unwittingly embracing classic antisemitic tropes and fostering a climate of division and resentment in schools that seek to overcome both?

Across America, many schools, whether public, private, or religious, have discovered that DEI has a disturbing way not of complementing the overall educational mission of schools, but of swallowing it whole. The chief mission of day schools is to instill Jewish values and inspire students to live purposeful lives. In the rush to adopt DEI programs, Jewish day schools risk losing sight of this mission. They adopt concepts that contain implicit anti-Jewish stereotypes, focus on the wrong aspects of Jewish diversity, and replace traditional Jewish pedagogy, which relies on discussion and disagreement, with an ideology that brooks no dissent.



Two of my sons are now in their twenties. The oldest made aliyah and served as a lone soldier in the IDF after completing his master’s degree in the United States. My second-oldest son is currently in the process of making aliyah and splits his time between the United States and Israel. Both are proud Black Jewish Zionists who love their diverse cultures. And both are testament to what day schools, at their best, can do to transform the lives of their students for the better.

Then there are my younger ones. I have a boy in middle school and a girl who just completed fourth grade. After a few years of attending a non-Jewish private school—and after watching antisemitic incidents unfold in the wake of last year’s war with Hamas—my husband and I decided that they, too, should have the benefits of a Jewish education. We looked for an environment that would challenge them academically and support their social growth, while

The chief mission of day schools is to instill Jewish values and inspire students to live purposeful lives.

also fully embracing their Judaism and their connection to Israel. In short, we wanted schools where our Zionist children would grow into proud Zionist adults.

Fortunately, both kids attend schools that express their support for Israel and for what it means to be Jewish. But there are noticeable differences between the kind of education they are receiving and the ones my older two got.

What has changed? In a word, ideology. DEI programs have supplanted what were once nuanced examinations of race, color, ethnicity, and culture with the simplistic, binary language of oppressor and oppressed. It is a form of black-and-white thinking that excludes the experiences of vast numbers of Jews. It is one that makes Jews feel ashamed of their so-called privilege rather than proud of their heritage.

For parents like me, it also raises the key question: Why bother switching our kids from non-Jewish to Jewish schools if we still have to fight similar political battles? The current antiracist binary paints my children either as perpetual victims because they are Black—or as undeserving beneficiaries of white privilege because they are Jewish. Even worse, it reduces their complex identities to a single one, all so that others can comfortably identify them by checking the box that identifies them as “Jews of color.”

This is not merely wrong. It is dangerous. If our children aren't given the tools of Jewish pride, knowledge, and moral self-confidence, they will be extremely vulnerable to the stereotyping and antisemitism that likely await them in college, if not sooner.

If there is anything redemptive about these more sour experiences, it's that many other Jewish parents have the same concerns. We are not alone. So what do we do?

- *Speak to school administrators.* Parent-school partnerships can have a positive impact on creating a culture of inclusion for students. School administrators need to hear from parents who hold different views and ideas on programming. Many parents fear being labeled racist if they question diversity programming, but it is necessary to speak up courageously and work with educators for what is in the best interest of students.
- *Encourage administrators and educators to consider how DEI programs can fuel antisemitism.* If day schools implement the kinds of DEI programming that embrace tropes such as “Jewish privilege” or Jews as “white” or “white adjacent,” they run a real risk of fueling antisemitism.
- *Work together with other parents, school administrators, and students to ensure that programming is living up to the school's mission and values.* Organizations such as the Jewish Institute for Liberal Values, Parents Defending Education, FAIR, and Heterodox Academy provide support and resources to parents, students, and schools as they grapple with how to balance ideas about diversity, equity, and inclusion with open and respectful discourse.

Our kids deserve adults who are ready to reject racial binaries and ideologies that do not apply to the Jewish people. Most of all, we need to embrace programs that encourage critical thinking and Jewish pride, that have our children unapologetically stating *Am Yisrael Chai*.

Now it's time to get to work. *