

# Homeschooling Might Just Be Your Answer



SEVERAL MONTHS prior to the pandemic, acquaintances invited us for Shabbat lunch at their home, folks with kids roughly the same ages as ours. One of the first questions we got was the one most fellow parents ask: “Where do your kids go to school?” I took a deep

breath. I knew exactly where this conversation was going.

“We homeschool.” The response was as it always is: “Oh, I could never do that.”

What I always want to answer but never do is this: “You could, you’ve just never seriously considered it before.”

Months into Covid, the wife sent me a WhatsApp message. Zoom classes weren’t working for her son (“distance learning” is not homeschooling), and she wanted me to tell her more about “this homeschooling thing.” Two years later, they’re still homeschooling, long after the local schools have gone back to post-Covid normal.

It turns out they *could* homeschool, and they actually liked the way it changed their family dynamics, schedule, and household budget.

We homeschooled prior to Covid and have no plans to send our children to school in the future, though we recognize that we never know what the future will hold. For now, it’s working well for our family, and everyone (parents and kids) is happy with our arrangement. We are able to enjoy flexibility in our day-to-day schedule and take vacations at any time in the year. Had we decided to send our children to school, tuition would have eaten up all of my salary, as well as serving as a kind of birth control. Instead, we were able to have as many children as we wanted (we currently have five, with hopes and plans for more), which would have been an unaffordable decision were we paying tuition. I’m still able to work part-time and remotely from home, fitting work into my day and evenings, around my kids’ schooling and classes.

When people tell us they could never homeschool, it is often rooted in a misunderstanding of what homeschooling entails; what it is and what it is not. So: What does a regular day of homeschooling look like in our home?

We are late risers, and the kids wake up naturally, some as early as six, some as late as nine. The earlier risers will read or play quietly until the day swings into motion. After breakfast (or several breakfasts), we start around nine or ten, with what we call “Morning Time.” During Morning Time, we do a different, religiously themed reading every day: on Mondays, a summary of the weekly Torah portion, and on Tuesday through Thursday a selection from Psalms, Proverbs, or a story directly from the Torah. On Fridays, we’ve been reading a graphic novel about the history of the Jewish people. Almost every day, we read a passage from a Jewish anthology of short stories, this year from Isaac Bashevis Singer. Throughout the week, we’ll spend time with our selected composer, poet, and artist

of the term, in addition to working to memorize a text in English (usually a section of Psalms or a chapter out of Torah) and a short, child-friendly poem. We pray together as a family in the morning as well.

Every day, my kids have a list of responsibilities they need to check off: an independent piano lesson (an online program called Hoffman Academy); a lesson from their language-arts workbook; a math lesson with me (we use a dummy-proof, parent-friendly curriculum called RightStart Math, one of many such homeschool math curricula); and independent reading on science, geography, or history from a stack of books I've laid out, related to what we're studying at the time.

In addition to this mostly independent work, we also work together on a literature-based geography and history curriculum. Our geography program takes us to a different country around the world each year, with “rabbit holes” down which we read picture books related to the people and places of the country we're studying, listen to local music, watch videos, cook a local meal, and explore local art (and often re-create it ourselves, including painting watercolors of local wildlife).

We're finished with most of our work around lunchtime, so my kids often have several hours to play outside, read, or take an art or tae kwon do class with local homeschool friends before their online Judaic classes with a former day-school teacher who decided to homeschool her own children.

Chanie Kirschner, the founder of Gesher, the program my children participate in, told me, “Day school is cost-prohibitive for so many of us. That was a big reason we started homeschooling ourselves four years ago. As a teacher in a number of Jewish day schools, I saw what we were getting for the exorbitant amount of tuition we were paying and determined that the cost just wasn't worth it.”

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wrap up our third year, it is the results that have convinced us to stay the course. We have totally reimagined what a true education is, as well as the purpose of school, which goes much further. My hope and belief is that my children are absorbing not just knowledge but a moral and civic sense, as well as an education in how to collaborate and how to navigate disputes — in short, good character and a healthy patriotism.

The late educational theorist John Taylor Gatto, who was four times New York City's Teacher of the Year, rejected the entire notion of compulsory schooling.

“No one believes anymore that scientists are trained in school science classes or politicians in civics classes or poets in English classes,” he explained. “The truth is that schools don't really teach anything except how to obey orders. This is a great mystery to me because thousands of humane, caring people work in schools as teachers and aides and administrators, but the abstract logic of the institution overwhelms their individual contributions. Although teachers do care and do work very hard, the institution is psychopathic — it has no conscience. It rings a bell and the

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## What can the Jewish community do to help families interested in veering off the day-school route, families who feel that something different is best for their children?

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young man in the middle of writing a poem must close his notebook and move to a different cell where he must memorize that man and monkeys derive from a common ancestor.”

Gatto’s work is popular among homeschooling families, but what should the Jewish perspective on home education be? The modern aggregation of children into “grades” of a given age came to America from Germany shortly before 1850. Certainly, there’s nothing Jewish about this model. Historically, Jews prayed in a group setting, as they do now, and typically learned in a yeshiva, in pairs (*hevruta*) matched more by ability than by age. No older traditional Jewish model I know of ever involved classrooms of students exactly the same age, moving from subject to subject based on the hour of the day.

A yeshiva isn’t the home, it is true. But home education comes to us straight from the Torah. A fundamental Jewish text is the Shema, which holds that parents are the primary sources of education for their children. As Moses instructs the Israelites in the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy, “and these words, which I teach you today, shall be on your heart, and you shall teach them to your children and speak of them, when you sit at home and when you walk abroad, when you lie down and when you rise up.” It’s such an important idea that in our Morning Time this year, we memorized all of Deuteronomy 6.

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, the home is considered the natural environment for the transmission of God’s word. Parents repeatedly are given the commandment and responsibility for

their children’s education. In Genesis 18:19 we are told Abraham is responsible for training his children and his household to walk in the ways of the Lord. We are instructed to explain that we observe Passover because of our liberation from Egypt in several different verses — the source of the famous “four sons” section of the Haggadah. In Proverbs 22:6 it is written, “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.”

Rabbi Reuven Spolter, the head of another online Jewish education option, Kitah (“class” or “classroom”), told me about his work. He explained, “Many Jewish families who homeschool use Kitah to empower their children to learn critical Judaic knowledge and text skills. Jewish parents who want to homeschool their children sometimes lack the knowledge and pedagogical tools they need to give their kids a strong foundation in Jewish learning. They turn to Kitah, which allows their children to gain proficiency in a number of different subjects on their own schedule.”

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There is a great deal of pressure in the Jewish community to eschew innovative enterprises outside the day-school model. The financial house of cards that the day-school system is built on is fragile, and many worry that a growth in alternatives such as homeschooling will undermine the shaky foundation.

But should we make the precariousness of a broken system our kids’ problem?

In the Jewish homeschooling community, we are spreading the word about resources such as Gesher and Kitah by word of mouth, without even a centralized website or group. There are others: Zehud (based out of Europe), Nigri Jewish Online School, Melamed, and Makom, to name just a few.

These resources aren’t just for homeschooling families, either. Rabbi Spolter told me about the families using Kitah. “It’s a mix of parents,” he said. “Some homeschool, a few are day-school parents

currently living in areas without formal Jewish schools. Some are parents who send their kids to public school and want to supplement their education with Jewish learning.” There are children already outside the traditional model who aren’t being well served and countless more who would do better outside a traditional classroom setting. Yet the communal pressure to stay the course is enormous, even when the ship is off course. What can the Jewish community do to help families interested in veering off the day-school route, families who feel that something different is best for their children?

Catholics, who have a robust parochial-school system, nevertheless have curriculum companies big and small that homeschoolers can draw from. There exists no parallel for Jewish homeschoolers, and many Jews cobble together options made for secular or Christian families, making constant substitutions. A talented grant writer could have a field day with such a project, but his proposals would have to land on the desks of foundations willing to be brave.

Imagine the possibilities: a Jewish art course, literature courses for different ages on classic Yiddish writers such as I.L. Peretz and Sholem Aleichem. Add in a publisher reprinting classics of Jewish poetry, short stories, and nursery rhymes specifically for a Jewish homeschool market.

Why can’t Jewish homeschoolers benefit from the for-profit companies already creating resources on Jewish subjects for day schools? When I contacted one such company, I was told they don’t explicitly advertise to the homeschool community, nor will they offer online classes of their material, for fear of angering their day-school clients. Another company made an “at home” version of their product but offered nothing in the way of technical support, rendering it useless to those without a day-school subscription.

The number of American families choosing to homeschool is exploding. The AP recently reported, “In 18 states that shared data through the current school year, the number of homeschooling students increased by 63% in the 2020-2021 school year, then fell by only 17% in the 2021-2022 school year.” These families are

deciding that their kids shouldn’t be made to fit inside a system, but that the system should instead be tailored toward the individual needs of the child and family.

In its reporting on the growth of homeschooling, the AP talked to a family that had recently adopted it:

Linda McCarthy, a suburban Buffalo mother of two, says her children are never going back to traditional school.

Unimpressed with the lessons offered remotely when schools abruptly closed their doors in spring 2020, she began homeschooling her then fifth- and seventh-grade children that fall. McCarthy, who had been working as a teacher’s aide, said she knew she could do better herself. She said her children have thrived with lessons tailored to their interests, learning styles and schedules.

“There’s no more homework ’til the wee hours of the morning, no more tears because we couldn’t get things done,” McCarthy said.

There are such families in the Jewish community, too. If we care more about outcomes than propping up the status quo, we’ll consider seriously how we can better serve their needs. \*