

Haley Epstine, Class of 2009

It's been said that it takes a village to raise a child. I found my village in the sixth grade when I entered the San Diego Jewish Academy. For the past seven years of my childhood I have been raised by more than just my parents: I have been raised by the teachers and families here at school.



For those very lucky students who have been as fortunate as I to have had a small blue sticker on our car windshield granting us access through the gate, they too know what it means to attend the San Diego Jewish Academy. They have heard the ASB

music blaring at lunch as students sing along while Dr. Davis dances to the music. They have pulled an all nighter in hopes of acing their Mrs. Stark Quest the following day. They understand what it means to go to high school with kids that you have known almost all your life.

You see, attending the San Diego Jewish Academy means more than being an athlete or a student. It means more than being a classmate or a friend. It means becoming part of a family.

That really is the best way to describe these past seven years of my life: family. For the past seven years I have grown up with the 37 other students who stand up here with me.

While the past seven years have been a series of spins, drops, and struggles, and while students have come and gone, at the end of the day I know I will never find relationships like the ones I have found here. What we may not realize until after we leave those gates for one last time is that we won't ever meet people like the ones who stand among us. We won't ever meet people who will stay up all night at school only to go laser tagging the next day, or who will wake up at 3:45 only to hike Masada at sunrise only to sing the Hatikvah at the top. But most of all we won't ever meet people who will love and care for us like they do. We won't ever find a family like the one we have found here.

But that's what it means to go to the San Diego Jewish Academy, and to be raised by a village of loud, overwhelming Jewish families. It means finding the piece of you that has been missing and for me, that was my Judaism. Growing up, Judaism never sat high on the priority list in my family. I never had Shabbat dinner and you had to drag my sister and me kicking and screaming to shul for the High Holidays. Yet, when I came to the academy I discovered a different form of Judaism, one that wasn't solely based on the Ten Commandments, the Torah, or the Talmud, but one that also folded into itself festivals, celebrations, Jewish ideals, and a uniquely Jewish sense of community. While the families who have invited me over to their house never knew it, they changed my life for the better. By introducing me to this whole new world of Judaism where it didn't matter what Torah stories you knew or didn't, but rather all that mattered was that you had an appetite both for food and for love, they showed me what it meant to be Jewish.

My Jewish identity only grew stronger during the three weeks I spent on our senior class trip to Poland and Israel. As I found my forehead touching the Kotel for the first time and my lip uttered the words of the Shema while a single tear running ran down my

cheek I found a love for my religion that words can't explain. While the families and my time spent at the academy back home had taught me what it means to be Jewish, those ten seconds that I spent reciting the Shema made me a Jew. While I had recited the Shema countless times back at school in teffilah and had spent classes learning about the translation and the meaning behind the prayer, nothing can compare to saying it at the wall. For those ten seconds that I recited the Shema everything else in the world stopped and the past seven years of my life assumed a whole new meaning.

Those three weeks that I spent walking, listening, and learning with twenty- eight of my fellow classmates through Poland and Israel served as the final chapter to our education at the San Diego Jewish Academy. The values and lessons from the last seven years of my Jewish education came alive during those weeks. It was alive in the Hebrew words that came from my lips and the sites that told the story of our home land, but most importantly it was alive in the pride that rushed through my body as I walked through the concentration camps in Poland with an Israeli flag tied to my back.

On the very early morning of May 20th, the final day of our trip I tried to stay awake during our take off from Tel Aviv. I wanted to spend every last moment possible in Israel. And as I fought the fatigue I began to think about something our tour guide Rueben had said the night before our flight. He was explaining to us that we walk backwards from the Kotel as a way to keep its image in our sights as long as possible. He instructed us to do the same as we flew home from Israel: he instructed us to fly backwards so that we could keep Israel's image in our sites as long as possible. So as I was following his directions and flying backwards, I came to a realization. While we can try to walk backwards from the Kotel as long as possible eventually we are forced to turn

around and walk forward. The same is true in life. Eventually we all must face the future and walk towards it. And for us that time has come. While we may all attempt to drive backwards out of our school's gates for our last time, we can't drive in reverse forever. The time has come for us to put our lives in drive and head off into the future away from this place that has been our home for so many wonderful days. But what we must remember is that just as the Kotel has been able to withstand the test of time, the friendships and memories we have made here are cable of just the same.

So to my fellow graduates I leave you with a quote from *Julius Caesar*, one of the very first texts we read together in high school with Ms. Mckinstry: There is a tide in the affairs of men Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; Omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries. On such a full sea are we now afloat, and we must take the current when it serves, or lose our ventures. So may we take a hold of our chances that lie in front of us and pursue our goals, and let us too change the world.