

## Graduation Speech 2016

By Chaim Heller, Head of School

As the current school year comes to an end and we prepare to graduate our senior class, I'd like to reflect on the different philosophies of education that accompanied you over the past 13 years, whether you were a lifer at SDJA or were in another school somewhere in this country. You have learned according to these approaches, even as one gradually became another, and it seems a good moment to stop, describe them and name them.

When you entered preschool or kindergarten, education was primarily about content. There are facts and perspectives you simply need to know. Quick - How much is 1 plus 3? 8 times 8? What is the capital of Virginia? How does our government work? What are saturated and supersaturated solutions? What exactly is the Balfour Declaration and what is the connection of the Jewish people to a small piece of land, the size of New Jersey that sits in between Syria and Egypt?

And then there were responsive classrooms, morning meetings, a focus on affective education in which we helped you develop what are called "habits of mind." Education is about not only having the content and the skills, but knowing how to act on it. Working hard and persevering, not giving up, having what we call a growth mindset so that you see yourself as always learning, managing impulsivity, listening with understanding and empathy, metacognition, applying past knowledge to new situations, always growing, never fixed, having unbound, lifelong potential.

And then in the past few years a third approach began to emerge as well. Generally, we call it 21<sup>st</sup> century learning, and without boring you all with the jargon, the 21<sup>st</sup> century educational movement is about teaching skills that you'll need for life. In a

world in which knowledge is often accessible through your smart phone, we need to develop the skill to critically discern the truth from a lie. We need to collaborate and work well in groups, communicate effectively, use design thinking to solve problems and leverage our skills to develop new ones.

But as you sit here today, poised to go forth into the world, all of this will only get you so far. Yes, you, our SDJA students are hard working. You have mastered material and gobs of content. You acquired new skills and abilities. You have persevered and are now so full of grit, you are gritty.

But what kind of person are you? What do you want to be now, when you are on the cusp of what we call “growing up”? Will you have integrity? Will you tell the truth when you have made a mistake, or lie your way out of a tough spot? Will you reap the rewards of your own work or will you cheat and cut corners? Will you care for others that have fewer opportunities? Will you help your fellow students, or will you ignore them? It seems to me that character development, while not the exclusive responsibility of school, is central to the mission of any Jewish day school that takes itself and its role seriously. Only we don't call it character development. We call it *Menschlichkeit*.

Quicker than you can imagine you will leave home and go to your next stop on your lifelong journey. You will find people who cheat, and people who don't. You will meet people who are fun to be with, but in a way that makes you feel less than, not more than. You will have many, many choices between doing the right thing or doing the wrong thing and then rationalizing your decision to yourself. And if you do it often enough, you stop bothering with the excuses or rationalizations. Justice Louis Brandeis said that the opportunities to do the right thing don't announce themselves with trumpets and lightning. They sneak up on you and with no warning you have to make a decision.

So, I'd like to leave you with 3 of the most important ideas you have learned at SDJA.

1. In *Pirkei Avot* we read: *Harchek mishachen ra, Ve'al titchaber lerasha*. Move away from people who pull you down, even if they are your roommate or neighbor. If you are with people who elevate you, who are positive, have integrity and do the right thing, your life will be richer and happier. If you remember nothing else from this talk, remember these 6 words. You are the company you keep.
2. *Bemakom she"ayn anashim, hishtadel lihiyot ish*. In a place where there are no standup people, try to be the person who stands up. This is harder. Some of us are shy and others don't like confrontation. But, if you stand up and do the right thing, even if you are alone, others will follow. And if they don't, remember those 6 words from a minute ago.
3. The third lesson is from Hillel; *Al Tifrosh Min Hatzibur* – do not separate yourself from the Jewish people. Identify your life with that of your community. Share its joys and sorrows, and do nothing to undermine its solidarity. Being part of the community is especially important when it's the most difficult. In the conflict with Amalek, the hands and arms of Moses grew weary and they took a large stone and placed it underneath him. "Could they not have given him a chair or a cushion?" the commentators asked? But Moses said "since my people are in trouble I will bear my part with them. For he who bears his portion of the burden will live to see the hour of redemption." That last one is for you Padres fans out there.

At San Diego Jewish Academy we have taught you that since all human beings are created in the divine image we are all of equal value. To God, *who we are* is far more important than what we

possess. Our values, our character, and how we act in the world is what matters most. As a society, we judge a person's value by their financial and professional success, by the home (or homes) they possess, the car (or cars) they drive and the clothes they wear. Jewish tradition teaches us that these measures of success are false. Many societies have had an abundance of smart, successful people, highly educated, brilliant scientists and businessmen. Indeed, a key lesson on your recent trip to Poland was to see just what a highly educated, technologically advanced and morally evil society is capable of doing

What matters most is character: honesty, integrity, hard work, empathy, and generosity of spirit and resources. In other words, ***Menschlichkeit***. As your time at SDJA comes to an end, I hope that we, your teachers, administrators, and parents who care so deeply about each and every one of you, that we focus on who you are becoming as people as much as we focus on what will undoubtedly be your academic, financial and career success.

***Bvirkat Chazak ve'ematz***, may you go forth with strength and courage.