

Dear Rabbi,

I've been so busy preparing the kids' uniforms, books and back to school items. One thing I really haven't been preparing is my children themselves. Is there a Jewish insight as to preparing children to get the most out of a new year of school?

Marcie K.

Dear Marcie,

I really enjoyed your question, as I never thought of a new school year in that light. Certainly you are correct; if mundane items need to be prepared, all the more so the reason for all those items - the children - ought to be prepared.

Judaism, in fact, is based upon the concept of preparation. Maybe it's not by chance that the new school year falls out right at the onset of the Jewish month of Elul, which is traditionally the month we begin to prepare for the upcoming Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year. In the month of Elul the shofar/ ram's horn is blown daily in synagogues throughout the world in preparation for the great shofar blowing on Rosh Hashana. Rosh Hashana, with all its grandeur, could not be properly appreciated, felt and taken advantage of without sufficient mental and emotional preparation. All of our holidays traditionally have a preparation period of thirty days, otherwise the holiday would not be properly prepared for and we would miss the maximum benefit to be derived from the holiday. Perhaps we could learn a lesson from the school year beginning at the beginning of Elul, your lesson of preparing the children for a new year of school.

We all know how the kids feel when summer vacation is winding down and a new school year is about to begin; the same way we felt as children - terrible! What we need to stress is the many wonderful opportunities made available for them at school to grow in so many ways. You could come up with a point system for good grades and/or for bringing home stories of personal growth. The points could be added up and redeemable for gifts, visits to fun places and the like.

A very important point to prepare the kids for is respect for their teachers and administration. It's not news to anyone how severe the lack of respect is in today's schools. A discussion about the importance of respect for elders and teachers in Judaism would be a wonderful preparation for the upcoming year. Part of that discussion could be a stress on the importance of knowledge, and the appreciation they need to show to those who impart the gift of that knowledge to them. This needs constant reinforcement throughout the year, through notes of appreciation and discussion. The most challenging area of this is for us parents to show how we respect the children's teachers, and back them up when the children complain so the children are present to the respect we afford the teachers. When we take the children's side and criticize the teachers, we teach our children the opposite message. The children should be lavishly praised and awarded when we hear from the teachers that our children have been respectful. (This, of course, doesn't preclude saying whatever needs to be said in parent/teacher meetings not in the presence of the children).

Another important discussion which should take place, and reinforced throughout the year, is standing strong against negative or dangerous peer pressure. It's a Jewish value, since Abraham, to have the inner strength and courage to stand up for what's right, even against the entire world. It's so crucial to have an open dialogue with your children that they feel both safe and comfortable sharing with you their pressures, tests and downfalls. They need to feel they can fall back on you when they're criticized for not going along with the crowd, and you need to be understanding and empathetic. Only you can alert them to how dangerous a world they're living in, even in the hallways of the school which are no longer safe.

To whatever extent you can instill in them Jewish values and provide them with Jewish education, they will be all the stronger to stay the course and enjoy a meaningful and fruitful new year of school.