

This Classroom Job in My Kid's Kindergarten Made Me a Jewish Day School Believer

By [Carla Naumburg](#) – Kveller
October 30, 2017



For some parents, sending their children to Jewish day school is a given. Perhaps they went to day school and want that same experience for their kids, or perhaps they didn't and wish they had.

This was not the case with my husband and me. He's a day school grad who felt no particular need to continue that legacy. As the product of a completely secular upbringing, I have often wished for a stronger Jewish education, but I wasn't sure if that was enough of a reason to justify the financial burden and schlepping required to get my girls across town each day to a Jewish school.

Nonetheless, when my older daughter reached pre-K, I found myself touring two of the four Jewish day schools within driving distance of our house. During those tours, it was immediately apparent that my girls would get a strong secular education, as well as fluency in Hebrew, a strong Jewish identity, and a deep understanding of Jewish texts, values, and practices that I never got as a kid.

Most of all, they'd know where they came from, where they belong and where they could always return. I loved that.

But I wondered if my husband and I couldn't give our daughters a good-enough Jewish education and identity—with the help of our synagogue, Hebrew school and extended family. We could hire a tutor, send them to Jewish summer camp and visit Israel.

That would be enough, wouldn't it?

For us, day school would be a leap of faith, and I remember the exact moment I saw clear to make that leap. Josh and I were touring the kindergarten classroom at JCDS, the Jewish Community Day School outside of Boston. In many ways, it looked the public school kindergarten classroom I remember from own upbringing, just with more Hebrew.

There was a large circular rug on the floor with each child's name written on strips of tape. Small plastic chairs were situated at round tables with the kids' names in English and Hebrew. The walls were covered with the alphabet and Aleph Bet, and kids' artwork. A toy Shabbat set complete with wooden candlesticks, kiddush cup, and challah sat on a small table. There were blocks and legos, costumes and masks, and lots of books in Hebrew and English.



Carla Naumberg

The teacher led us to a board on the wall that listed all the classroom jobs, with a space for a child's name next to each role. There was the beloved line-leader, of course, and several other fairly common roles.

But I was captivated by one particular job: The Class Comforter. The Class Comforter has two primary responsibilities: to accompany a sick classmate to the nurse's office and, along with the teacher, to call children who are sick at home to wish them a *refuah shlemah* (a full recovery).

I felt my eyes welling up as the admissions director described this. I had rarely heard of a school calling a sick child at home to check on them, and in the few cases I had it was always the teacher calling, often with a reminder about making up work.

This was something entirely different. This school was not only teaching the Jewish value of *bikkur cholim*—visiting or helping the sick—but it was showing the children how, in the most concrete possible way, to live those values in the context of community.

Being part of a community means helping and comforting those who need it, not because you're their best friend or you're bored with math. You walk your classmate to the nurse's office even if he's the one who kicked you yesterday, even if she's the girl you excluded at recess, because that's what Judaism teaches.

I was thinking about my own daughter, a generally healthy child who was frequently home from preschool because of asthma, croup, ear infections or other illnesses. I was thinking about what it would mean to her to get a phone call from a classmate on a sick day. *You matter. We're thinking about you. We miss you, and we hope you come back soon.*

My own experience of becoming a mother had been so much harder than I'd ever imagined. For the previous five years, I had felt confused, anxious and scared. The sheer number of decisions I had to make on a daily basis was overwhelming, and I frequently worried I was making the wrong choice. It was my community—my family and friends, our neighbors, our synagogue, and the new mother support groups I attended each week—that got me through it. They gave me advice and ideas, and sat with me as I cried when there was no advice to be given.

I hadn't really thought about what being part of a community meant before becoming a mother; it was just something I had fallen into by virtue of which dorm I happened to be assigned in college or where I worked. Once I became a mother, I was fortunate to live in a town and be a part of a religion and culture that values community.

When we signed up my daughter for day school, we were choosing to be a part of another community—for ourselves and for our children.

My daughters are now in third and second grade at JCDS, and they are living and learning the values and practices I had hoped they would. In addition to studying literacy, math, engineering and other secular subjects, their Hebrew is better than mine. My younger daughter helps lead services on Friday night. They're grappling with the Torah's stories, what they mean and how they're relevant to life in the 21st century.

Most importantly, they're learning, in the words of Ram Dass—a spiritual leader who grew up Jewish in the same town where we live—that we're all just walking each other home. Or, in some cases, to the nurse's office.

(This article was sponsored by and produced in partnership with the [Avi Chai Foundation](#), which is committed to the perpetuation of the Jewish people, Judaism and the centrality of the State of Israel to the Jewish people. In North America, the foundation works to advance the Jewish day school and overnight summer camp fields.)