

It goes without saying that childhood and young adulthood are pivotal times in the spiritual and psychological development of our youth. It is at those times that they will develop a philosophy of life, make lifelong friends, join a peer community, possibly choose a lifetime partner, decide where they may live, select a profession, and modify their bonds with organized religion -- not to mention times of personality formation. The implications for parents are clear: We must make every effort during those years to maximize the likelihood that our children will strengthen their Jewish commitment.

Before I was married, I had nine theories about raising children, and no kids. Now I have nine kids, and no theories!

However, I do have some tips and strategies that may help you in creating a stronger Jewish connection for your children -- be they young or older. To that end, here are '10 Things Parents Can Do To Bring Judaism Alive for Kids'.

1) *Celebrate Shabbat*

Even if you don't keep it strictly, mark the day as separate and unique. You'll notice that this item is titled 'Celebrate' Shabbat, not 'Observe Shabbat' or 'Keep Shabbat'. While proper 'doing' Shabbat certainly involves observing and keeping it, it's of vital importance that the celebratory aspect of Shabbat be emphasized with your children. Your children should feel Shabbat is something they 'get to do', not something they 'have to do.' Countless Jewish children and young adults have been turned off to a Judaism they perceive as burdensome. Make sure that doesn't happen to your children!

Tell everyone that Friday night is reserved for family time at home, and have a festive meal in the dining room each Friday night. Light the candles and say a blessing on the wine (Kiddush) and bread (Ha'Motzei) before serving a delicious meal. Singing festive Jewish songs and sharing meaningful Jewish ideas at the table enhance the quality of the food and the good company. It's been said by many that "It's not Jews who keep Shabbos, but it's Shabbos that keeps the Jews." Shabbat has a magical quality that can warm every Jewish neshama (soul).

And for those already observing Shabbat, there is always room to further enhance your family's Shabbat experience. Buy special foods you enjoy, to be eaten only on Shabbat. Be prepared with questions for discussion at your family meal(s): "What happened this week that was good?"

"What is something new you learned this week?" "Does anyone have a thought to share about the weekly Torah reading?"

2) *Support Israel*

Israel is our homeland and can connect your children to Judaism in many ways. Know classic and modern Israeli history, and teach it to your children. Buy Israeli products whenever possible. A can of Israeli cucumbers or a Jaffa orange on the table is a teachable moment. Keep current with the news and latest innovations and inventions from Israel, and discuss them around the dinner table. Make plans to visit Israel a true family goal -- or better yet, book tickets! In the Smason family, our visits to Israel have created indelible connections to the country and the land. Now, our older children all live in Israel.

Israel 101: Encourage your child's Bnei Mitzvah project to be Israel-centered in some way (i.e. supporting Israeli soldiers). An Birthright Israel trip and gap year in Israel can transform your child's perspective about and connection to Israel. College campuses today are difficult environments for supporters of Israel -- make sure your child is knowledgeable about and can advocate for Israel.

3) *Keep Kosher*

To be a good person, one must do good things. Similarly, to be a good Jew, one must *do* Jewish things. Keeping kosher builds pride in Jewish identity. Being Jewish should never be something your children are embarrassed about or feel the need to apologize for. Additionally, keeping kosher keeps us separate and distinct. And a kosher commitment builds discipline.

*A Jewish man was in a supermarket in a Jewish neighborhood.. He saw a woman who appeared to be not Jewish, trying to get her young child to put down a candy bar he had picked off the shelf.
'Achashverus, you put that down! It's not kosher!'*

*Intrigued, the young man decided to investigate.
'Excuse me, ma'am, are you Jewish?'
'No.'*

*'So why did you say that?'
'Why? I'll tell you why. 'Cuz I see all those Jewish mothers saying that to their kids -- and it works, so I decided to try it.'*

While the Torah has high standards we should aspire to observe, an important practical approach for families seeking to grow Jewishly is: 'One step at a time.' Something is better than nothing, and partial observance eventually leads to a more complete keeping of Judaism. Keep kosher at home, even if you aren't (yet) prepared to keep kosher outside your kitchen. Not prepared to fully keep kosher at home? Start with separating milk and meat, and avoid eating pork and shellfish. The power of keeping tangible mitzvot can't be overestimated -- rituals work!

Kosher 101: At the store, make shopping for kosher items a game. Give your kids 'kosher cards' that have symbols indicating recommended kosher products.

4) *Be Aware of the Jewish calendar*

You may not be aware of it, but: January 19 is National Popcorn Day. March 14 is National Pi Day July 10 is Teddy Bear Picnic Day. Sept. 19 is Talk Like a Pirate Day. There may also be Jewish holidays you aren't familiar with!

Be aware of upcoming holidays and observances and note them with excitement and anticipation. Be in sync with the rhythm of the Jewish year. We're familiar with the secular, seasonal holidays -- why not our own, as well? Pay particular attention to the holidays that your children will find joyous and exciting.

While many parents emphasize synagogue attendance during the High Holidays, there's nothing quite like the joy of Purim and Simchas Torah for the creation of joyous Jewish memories and instilling a love for Judaism in the minds and hearts of your children. Hamentashen! Candy Apples! Dancing with the Torah! Noise-makers when Haman's name is read during the Megilla! Children, and even newcomers to Judaism, find it difficult to relate to the emotions of awe and fear.

Make Rosh Chodesh a day when the family goes out for ice cream or everyone gets a new book. Don't schedule events or outings on major holidays. Let your kids know you're paying attention to the holidays. Then, they'll want to know more about them.

5) *Go to Synagogue*

Why? Everyone needs to be part of a Jewish community. One can't be a good Jew in the fullest sense of the term while living in Hicksville, Iowa (with apologies to any Jews currently in Hicksville!). A synagogue provides a golden opportunity for your children to meet and socialize with other Jews kids -- whether in the lobby when the rabbi is delivering his sermon (gulp!), or

through dynamic Jewish youth groups such as NCSY and Bnai Akiva. Children pick up things through osmosis. Additionally, don't underestimate the benefit of your child making a connection with the rabbi. Everyone needs a mentor and a spiritual role model. It could pay off big-time when your child is a teen or young adult, and needs Jewish guidance.

6) *Treat Jewish Education Seriously*

Being knowledgeable about Judaism is indispensable to the development of a mature Jewish identity. Many Jewish teens and adults have painful memories of a 'Hebrew School' experience where the only Hebrew words they remember are "*sheket b'vakasha!*" (be quiet!). Here are some real quotes from Hebrew school attendees:

What I Learned in Hebrew School.

The Egyptians were all drowned in the dessert. Afterwards, Moses went up on Mount Cyanide to get the ten amendments.

The seventh commandment is: "Thou shalt not admit adultery."

Moses died before he ever reached Canada.

Then Joshua led the Hebrews in the battle of Geritol.

David was a Hebrew king skilled at playing the liar. He fought with the Finklesteins, a race of people who lived in Biblical times.

Solomon, one of David's sons, had 300 wives and 700 porcupines.

Most religions teach us to have only one spouse. This is called monotony

How can our children grow to become good Jews if they don't know what being Jewish is about? There is much to be said for immersion in a Jewish Day School experience. However, a joyous, relevant after-school or Sunday school experience (such as offered locally by Aish HaTorah) -- where Mom and Dad sit in on Torah classes during the time their children are learning about Judaism -- can be just the right choice for some families. And since Jewish education begins in the home, make sure your home bookshelves are stocked with good Jewish books (I'm not talking about *Portnoy's Complaint*), and leave a few around for your kids to pick up and browse.

7) *Make it clear that Judaism is about Ethics ...Jewish ethics*

While we take great pride in our children's professional achievements ('My son/daughter, the doctor!'), we should also aspire to our children becoming not only *successful Jews*, but *good Jews*.

What does it mean to act Jewishly?

While rituals work, Judaism isn't just about rituals. Being a good Jew means *acting* Jewishly, along with doing Jewish things. If you can't identify for your kids Jewish behavior and standards of ethical conduct, chances are your children won't see much of a difference between themselves and their polite, pleasant, honest non-Jewish friends and neighbors.

For example, your children should know that Judaism requires demanding and exacting standards of personal and business honesty, far above what 'passes' in general society. To be a good Jew means avoiding both slander and gossip (even when true) like the plague. Kids need to understand that Judaism is their moral compass, as well as a guide to the food they eat. The goal of Judaism is to create a *mentsch* -- a decent, compassionate, ethical person who acts in accordance with the highest Torah standards. Teach your children how to act Jewishly.

8) *Treat G-d as if He really exists*

While Judaism is very much focused on actions in the 'here' rather than belief in the 'hereafter', developing a relationship with a living, personal G-d is the foundation upon which all of Judaism rests. Do your children believe in a G-d that cares about our every action and Who is always with us? Make it clear by *your* words and deeds that you understand G-d is real and that He cares about our behavior and well-being. By regularly giving thanks to G-d, praying to G-d, pointing out the open and hidden miracles in your life and life of your family. Stated simply, talk about G-d with your children. You'll make what for many is an amorphous, dispassionate belief something vibrant and real.

Let your children hear you use phrases such as *gam zu l'tova* -- this, too, is for the best. Gratitude to G-d need not always be expressed in formal prayers. When words of thanks to the Almighty are frequently heard in a household, your children will become accustomed to saying thank-you to G-d.

9) *Make every trip a Jewish field trip*

Going out for ice cream? It's a chance to say blessings of thanks. Headed to the zoo on a Sunday afternoon? "Who knows which animals and birds are of the kosher species -- and why?"

Off to the art or history museum? What are the Jewish connections? A long drive or family trip are chances to see the hand of G-d in nature. If you need to prepare in advance your 'Jewish lessons' that's OK. Every time out of the house with the children is an opportunity to see things through Jewish lenses.

10) *Jewish Food*

Some of your children's fondest Jewish memories can be tied to Shabbos cholent, Chanukah latkes, Purim hamentashen, Pesach brisket and Shavous cheesecake. The way to a child's Jewish heart is through their taste buds. Learn to cook distinctive and delicious Jewish foods -- and share with your children the religious and traditional significance of those delicacies