

SHE SAID

Staying Private

I thought I was the last person on Earth (after my husband) who would send her kid to a private Jewish high school. Yet, today I am the parent of a daughter entering her second year at New Community Jewish High School, also known as New Jew, in West Hills.

My previous aversion to Jewish private schools can be traced to three things.

Thing No. 1: I am the product of the Los Angeles Unified School District and California's public university system. If I had had a private school education, I would have begun this paragraph with a less

pedestrian word than "thing." But even if my education wasn't stellar, it was certainly adequate; particularly when one considers my parents paid less than \$4,000 for my first 17 years of schooling. Given my largely positive experience with public schools, and the fact that our local public high school has excellent test scores, sending my daughter to the neighborhood school would have been a no-brainer.

Thing No. 2: Jewish private schools are, well, Jewish. Really Jewish. When my parents decided that my youngest sister

would not follow in my public school footsteps, but would attend Northridge's Abraham Joshua Heschel Day School instead, I was aghast. "But, an all-Jewish school does not reflect the real world," I argued to my father. "Jews are only a small percentage of the population. Shouldn't she be at a school that reflects all of society?"

(Disclosure: My "diverse" public school was a far cry from a miniature United Nations. The student body was 40 percent blonde, middle-class cheerleader; 40 percent blond, middle-class jock; and 10 percent upper-middle-class Jew-

ish kids who wore faux cheerleading sweaters and tallied the stats at football games or ran for student government.)

Thing No. 3: Private schools are expensive — particularly when compared to free schools — and New Jew is no exception. Not private-Catholic-school moderately expensive; more like Harvard-Westlake, Brentwood High, Crossroads expensive. OK, not quite, but almost. Yes, New Jew provides assistance to families who are unable to afford the tuition. But if you are someone, like me, who is fortunate enough to have a decent family income that precludes financial aid but who is also not wealthy, the decision to opt out of the public school system definitely requires some

sacrifice. We are not eating macaroni and cheese every night for dinner, but all major purchases are on hold indefinitely. And every time my husband passes a BMW dealership, he gets a little *farklemt*.

So considering my previous antipathy toward Jewish private schools, my husband's disdain for private schools in general and my daughter's desire to join her middle-school classmates at our local high school, how did my oldest child end up at New Jew? Like most things in life, there wasn't one great fortune-cookie moment, but a series of unrelated events and observations that collided to create the perfect Jewish-high-school storm.

The first event occurred at a party. My husband and I met a couple who had just moved into our neighborhood from Missouri.

"So what brought you to Los Angeles from St. Louis?" I asked just to make conversation.

"We moved here so our son could attend New Community Jewish High School," they said.

When a couple moves 2,000 miles just so their son can attend a school that is a five-minute, 36-second drive from your home, that gets your attention.

And then there were the observations about our public middle school. Every semester, without fail, my daughter would get two teachers who were phenomenal,



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two others who were neither great nor awful, and one who you wouldn't let teach your dog how to sit. The curriculum was challenging, but not in a way that fostered deep thinking. I assumed that the pattern of standards-based teaching and a hit-or-miss teaching staff would continue at the high school level. I felt that in high school, my daughter would learn

phrase, the thing that every student knows is the foundation of the school: "Not everyone can be an A-plus student, but every student can strive to be an A-plus human being."

One of the expectations at New Jew is that when a student opens a door, they will hold it open for anyone coming up behind them. Why does holding a door open for another student or a teacher matter so much? New

supported her by singing along. We are staying because her history teacher recognized that history is as much about the present as it is about the past and taught the class how historical events often relate to what is happening in the world today; and because her English teacher picked up the phone to tell me my daughter had done particularly well on one of the assignments. We are staying because her

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what was taught, but would not learn how to learn.

But the clincher was listening to Bruce Powell, New Community Jewish High School's founder and head of school, speak at its open house. Listening to Powell make the case for New Jew is like listening to Ronald Reagan instructing Gorbachev to knock down the Berlin Wall. Powell speaks of things you thought were impossible: high school girls who travel in a "circle of friends" and not cliques; school-sponsored trips to Israel; mentor groups so no child gets lost; a school where it is expected that every teacher, not just a few, will be exceptional. And then there is the Powell catch-

Jew's core is Jewish values, and one basic tenet of Judaism is that we look out for each other and for strangers. A teenager who is taught to hold doors open for strangers grows into an adult who never walks through any of life's doors without looking to see if someone coming up behind them needs a little bit of help.

These are some of the reasons that my husband and I put aside our reservations about Jewish private school.

But we are also staying at New Jew because of some things that have occurred since we first signed on the dotted line. We are staying because when my daughter played The Beatles' "Let It Be" on the piano for the school talent show, the entire student body

science teacher cared not only that her homework was scientifically accurate, but also corrected grammatical errors; and because her math teacher went beyond the call of duty to provide extra help when she needed it.

But the most important reason we are staying is because the kid who really didn't want to go in the first place, and had the option of returning to public high school for her sophomore year, chose to stay.

After a year at a Jewish high school, I now understand my father's response to my argument that sending a child to an all-Jewish school does not "reflect the real world."

"No, it is not the real world," he explained, "but it is a really good one." **JF**