On Making Peace with Sending My Children to Jewish Day School

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I'm going up the staircase when the exchange floats back between four spandex-swathed legs I am trailing to collect my nursery-aged son.

"So, there I am, I'm in the middle of my shower and the water goes out. Just like that, it stops. So I jump out and call down to the doorman who tells me that they're working on the water line. I should've received a memo. I have shampoo in my hair, and I just got back from the gym but what choice do I have? I run down and grab a taxi BACK to the gym where I finally get a nice, hot shower."

Doorman. Taxi. Gym. These words are the foreign currency I handle in forays into the strange territory I enter in intervals, if I pick my children up at the Jewish Day School they attend in our city.

According to the statistics the school sends out annually, approximately 30 percent of families at the school receive some form of financial aid toward tuition. So, if there are 50 children in a grade, that means about 15 of them are receiving assistance toward paying the approximately $25,000 tuition. There may be some kids out there with mine who are living without doormen, taxis, and gyms on demand. But the culture does not speak to it.

It's in the small things. They catch me in subtle spaces, when I'm not expecting them.

The school's annual dinner is approaching, and a parent asks me if I'm planning to attend. "I'm not sure," she says to me, then adds conspiratorially, "Do you really think they use the money for *scholarships*?"

My four-year-old receives a belated birthday present from a classmate. She eagerly tears open the wrapping paper and the enclosed piece of purple, stuffed fabric falls to the floor. She turns it over and studies the embroidered pillow from a brand-name boutique in our area. "What *is* it?" she finally asks. I stifle my own bemusement, try to talk it up by telling her it's a beautiful pillow from a boutique home furnishings store and she accepts it gingerly, trying it out on her bed. I later take her to the store and find the only thing she can exchange it for would be an oversized mug or some silverware. The pillow cost $45.

I have attended toddler birthday parties that cost thousands of dollars (my husband once grabbed a brochure on the way out, out of morbid curiosity). For one, the birthday girl's parents rented out a bowling alley. At another, the ballroom of a synagogue was transformed into a carnival, complete with booths, bouncy houses, and smorgasbord of a dessert table, bearing the birthday girl's name in chocolate and then again in cookie. The only thing missing was a carnival barker at the door and a Ferris wheel…but there was a miniature wheel on the dessert table, laden with gumdrops.

Make no mistake: I am not bitter. It was never a goal of mine to be rich, not even as a child when my sister told me she would grow up to have houses wherever she wanted and vacations to match. I only wanted to do interesting work and have "enough" money to pay for my life. The problem is twofold: First, more and more, I don't seem to have enough money for my life, which includes three wonderful children for whom I wish to provide a Jewish education. And second, while I don't put a premium on extravagance and a luxe lifestyle, the families my children are going to school with do, and that is simply not where I wish my children's value compass to be oriented.

Ever able to see both sides of a story, I play devil's advocate with myself in so many ways. That child with the bowling alley party? An only child. Perhaps her parents are overjoyed at her very being, so much so that they'll go to lengths to celebrate the day of her birth. She'll only be five once! And the carnival girl—I don't know the family; it may be that she has survived a threatening illness, leaving her parents to cleave to her and shower her with gifts each day they can.

Perhaps before spending $3,000 on their child's birthday party, these parents have just given $30,000 to a worthy charity.

But my inner critic is unsatisfied.

I have endlessly told myself that just because I feel little kinship with most of the parents I meet does not mean I should rule out this choice for my children. "It's not about me," I think, in that well-worn mantra of parenthood. A parent tells me he had a visceral negative reaction to my kids' school after taking a tour, and I feel proud at my adult ability to not be reactive and walk away in disdain, but to "sit with the discomfort," and allow the good to mingle with—hopefully overpower—what I perceive to be bad.

But I know that visceral reaction. I had stomach pains sitting through the carnival birthday party.

And then I have a conversation with a very sensible-minded male nanny. He hears me talk about my likes and dislikes of the school, my "it's not about me" reasoning. He nods, but then points out simply, "Parents' values become children's values. If you don't mesh with the parents, chances are your kids eventually will not mesh with the kids."

This is what brings on the stomach pains—the presentation of such a different set of values and the lack of representation of my own values of a simpler, grassroots way of experiencing the world.

You may ask: Why, then, send your children to this school—or any other Jewish Day School for that matter? Private school is as private school does: It's private; it costs as much as a salary for many workers in this country; it's not the "real world." And I want my children to live in the real world. They do: Their family background is diverse, and they live in a socio-economically, racially, and ethnically diverse neighborhood where they play with neighborhood kids and see the range of human experience around them and in their home. But my husband and I are spiritual people who believe in the value of a religious education and the deep wisdom of the Torah. It is a worldview ahead of its time, a worldview that exhorts each person to actively pursue justice, to subjugate the material in favor of elevating what cannot be seen, to actively remember that we were slaves in a foreign land, and above all, to "walk humbly with God." To be sure, humble need not mean poor—there is no taking of vows of poverty in Judaism. But humble to me is, very simply put, down to earth. Can you be down to earth living in a luxury high rise, where my son's best friend lives in a penthouse? Maybe. But if you choose to live in an enclave where everyone lives and acts as you do, will you *de facto* see the rest of the world as Other?

Money is one thing. A close friend married a millionaire and has had homes in Europe, Israel, and New York. Humble? Open to the world? Check and

check. This woman is so very not ostentatious, so conscious that others don't live like her. She brings the spirituality of the Judaism she lives to bear on the world she lives in rather than using it as an excuse to associate only with those like her.

Money alone does not necessarily corrupt. But money mixed with a sheltered, clannish way is like Teflon, sealing off those on the inside from those without. I have found that many at my children's school are not there because they seek a lifestyle guided by spiritual values and ideals but almost for the opposite reason that my children are there. These families seek to protect their children from the world. They want an environment that is Jew-"ish" and more rarified than their local public school. They want their children mingling with the right kind and marrying "in." And along the way, their kid should learn "the drill" of Jewish prayers and customs, love of Israel, and Hebrew language.

To varying degrees, we may wish elements of these things for our children. The question is at what price and how.

Anecdote: A stay-at-home mother who picks her children up in three-inch heels every day joins me where I am waiting with two mothers for dismissal. Someone has asked about my kids' last names. "They have two—my husband's, then mine. That's how it's done in Latin America," where my husband's family is from, I explain. She looks confused. My explanation has hit Teflon and there is no flutter of recognition for this custom, nor even a nod of assimilation of something done differently in a different place. Just a furrowed brow and "So...what do people call your family?"

When families operate from synagogue to Day School to Jewish camp to wealthy home enclaves within the Jewish community, and no other, it breeds ignorance of the world and how to behave in it. When my dark-skinned husband first began dropping my kids off at the school, he called me in a bad mood. "The parents are snobby," he said. "They're staring at me or deliberately not talking to me." I resisted the facility of crying racism and pointing a finger, mulled this over for a minute, and then responded. "They're not all snobby. Most of them are just ignorant." It is true: Many of these parents are friendly, and they mean well. They just don't know much about people other than Jews. Middle- or upper-middle class Jews. Or non-Jews who are white and wealthy, i.e., their neighbors and business associates. They simply don't have another reference point. Perhaps they think my husband doesn't speak English.

And though there are varied countries, neighborhoods, even races or religions of origin among the student body, it all seems to subsume to some

white-washed, wealthy core. When once I tried to engage a light-skinned parent of Latin-American extraction in conversation about her heritage she smiled politely as if to say, "Don't blow my cover."

Why must I choose one closely-held set of values over another equally closely held? Part of me wants to run with that parent who "viscerally reacted" to my children's school, and then turn back and look at it from the outside and lob insults. "Spoiled. Insular. Ignorant. Pretentious," it would be easy to say. "Here is me and my kin...and over there is *that school* and *those* people." Ah. So easy to divide and label. Particularly for me, who grew up in this same city, contending with these same issues at a different Jewish Day School. When I got to public university, I breathed freely and imbibed the range of people around me from all walks of life—the simple regularity of everyday people and the diversity of students from countless countries and cultures. I promised myself and my unborn children that I would not subject them to that bubble of an environment that is Jewish Day School. And yet, life is so imperfect. So gray.

If my Jewish values conflict in nearly every way with the Jewish community in the main, as it is lived and expressed in my city (and many others) and my children's school, if the humble is hidden from view, I am unable to turn away and reject it. My children come home talking of the weekly Torah portion; my older children can parse Hebrew words and Jewish text themselves and are beginning to cite Midrash. Hovering beyond the content my children garner, I find Torah values are there, in the background. They are represented by certain people I can single out, certain teachers or families whose commitment to a Judaism of spirit and a somewhat more low-key existence match my family's to a greater extent than the norm. They are unfortunately not the norm, though I would wish them to be, in a school that purports to represent a spiritual lifestyle in the Jewish tradition.

I would venture to say that this is part and parcel of the turning from the practice of Judaism: not for the Torah or the values it represents but for the way it is *lived*.

For now, we persist. Every day I watch and listen. I gather the subtleties. We may stay, and continue to live with the discomfort. But I may decide that I can't hold my breath anymore, that I just need to exhale in a space that speaks more to my family's values. That may be in a non-Torah setting that does a better job of bearing out traditional Jewish values than a yeshiva or Day School can offer.