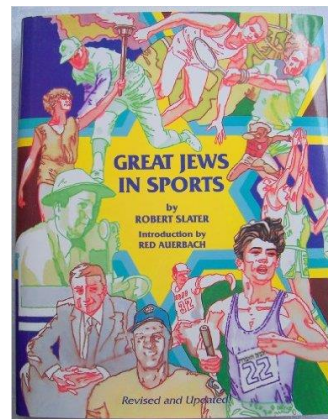


RABBI GROSSMAN'S REFLECTIONS

Written by Rabbi Eric Grossman, Head of School, as shared in the weekly Zmail publication

CELEBRATING SCHOOL SPORTS, November 2

When I worked in a Jewish bookstore, one of our most requested items was "Jews in Sports." It was purchased almost exclusively as a Bar Mitzvah gift. The shopper was invariably looking for a Jewish-themed volume as a present for the young man who was "...very into sports." While there has been a long-standing view, especially in the Middle Ages, that Jews do not get involved in physical activity, Jewish history and contemporary Jewish society show a strong relationship between our people and physical prowess. Our **Upper School** history teacher, **Dr. Ari Sclar** has dedicated his scholarly career to this topic, and has published groundbreaking research on the subject. Our students are blessed to be taught by such leaders in unique academic fields. Only at Ramaz!



Each of our divisions engages our students in sports and other physical activities, and we are constantly looking for new opportunities and venues to exercise our students' bodies and minds. At our **ECC** Parent Breakfast last week, our ECC director, **Lori Ash**, explained how our new LS movement room encourages our youngest students to engage more fully in physical activity, since the intentionally smaller size of the room (relative to our big, beautiful new gym) does not overwhelm the younger kids. The building's new play roof also provides additional outdoor space for our city school.

While our location in the city has limitations, it provides many opportunities. In our **Middle School**, we have begun a new initiative to incorporate within our student advisory schedule time for our kids to get outside and take advantage of the world's most famous urban park. Last Tuesday, our 6th grade went to Central Park in the beautiful weather to play Red Rover and other group games; the program will continue this Tuesday with 7th grade. Thank you to the MS parents who brought the idea to me, and to **Morah Smadar** and **Lois Nyren** for the quick and responsive implementation. We love to make great ideas happen! A special thank you to the faculty and staff volunteers who gave of their time to accompany our students to the park: **Devora Carr, Joseph DaCorta, Larry Gross, Zach Lebwohl, and Michelle Lee**.

Our US fall sports are in full swing. The **JV Boys Basketball** team had a triumphant season opener, coming from behind 4 times in the game to defeat JEC, our **JV Girls Basketball** team beat Flatbush, **Varsity Hockey** beat Frisch, and **JV** and **Varsity Girls Volleyball teams** are on a winning streak. A special shout-out to our new varsity basketball coach, **Yogev Berdugo**. Not only does he train and guide our players in the game, I have also observed how he models *menschlichkeit* for our students in his interactions with our players and the opposing team. We are blessed to have staff who carry forth the Ramaz mission to every part of our program.

All of our team sports in the MS and US are under way, so please come out to our games and cheer on our athletes!

Speaking of athletes, congratulations to all of our Ramaz runners who participated in yesterday's marathon, and condolences to all the Mets fans who watched the World Series slip away. While it will take some time to recover from last night's loss, it was, nonetheless, exciting to have a New York team come so far.

THE PEOPLE OF THE BOOK, October 26, 2015

This past week, we read about how the story of the Jewish people began with God's call to Abraham. And while Avraham gets credit as the father of the Jewish people, Rambam notes how his greatness and significance is almost totally eclipsed by that of Moses. Maimonides offers a complex explanation of this strange overshadowing (*Hilchot Avodat Kochavim* 3:2-3), but I think the answer is much simpler: Moses gave us a book.

Since Moshe, the importance of the book, and the centrality of reading, has become the hallmark of the Jews, and perhaps the key to our remarkable success as a nation. At Ramaz, reading remains front and center in each of our divisions; at every level, students are challenged to read at the highest level that is developmentally sound.

Last Wednesday morning, at our Kindergarten Parents Breakfast, our teachers modeled the different ways in which they engage our students in reading from the very moment they enter our Lower School. Phonics, Big Books, and even books without words are used as entry points to stimulate our children to begin a life of literacy. One of our distinguishing features as a school (a topic I addressed last week) is how we engage our students with Hebrew reading from such a young age. A special *yishar ko'ach* to Jessica Finnel, Yael Simpson, Kara Zamist, Yael Levy, and Liat Malka for their exceptional Hebrew presentation, accompanied by our puppet, Bentzi.

By the time our students reach high school, they are unpacking the most iconic and dense texts in the Western and Jewish traditions. Last week I had the pleasure of watching Dr. Steven Milowitz teach an Upper School class on Beowulf, and was amazed at his ability to bring this difficult text to life. Our students have the honor of learning from teachers like Dr. Milowitz, (a PhD in English literature) who come with a depth and breadth of knowledge seldom found outside the college campus.

Our wonderful Middle School librarian, Mrs. Noreen Wachs (parent of Ramaz alumni Tamar (Wachs) Kahn '98 and Hillel Wachs '01), has introduced an exciting and creative reading initiative called the Newbery Challenge, where parents and students are invited to read three or more books out of a list of twelve, discuss the books in a group, and together decide which one they think will win the 2016 Newbery Award.

The announcement of the Newbery Challenge mentions past winners including *Bridge to Terabithia*, which I remember my own Lower School librarian reading to our class in 1978, the year it received the award. At 7-years-old, it was the first book that made me understand how literature can challenge us with a set of values so different from our own, and simultaneously move us to tears about characters that are foreign and fictional.

Perhaps take the time this week to share with your children and students those books that moved you, challenged you, or changed your life. Let your children know why, 3,500 years after Moses, we are still the People of the Book.

THE POWER OF PRAYER, October 19, 2015

One significant element of Ramaz that distinguishes us from other Jewish day schools is that we are connected to a synagogue.

This feature emerges both from our continued historical relationship with KJ, and the fact that our Lower School is physically attached to the *shul*. This nexus fosters a culture and philosophy that promotes a link between study and prayer, mind and soul. It is a combination that has created a spirituality that is uniquely Ramaz.

This spirit moved me when I joined the seniors in the Upper School for *davening* last Monday morning. It was simply the finest weekday *davening* I have ever experienced in a day school. When I conveyed my praise to several of my colleagues, they responded, "That's nothing, you should see what it is like on *Rosh Chodesh*!" And that is precisely my point: We expect to have an uplifting and engaging *davening* on rare occasions like *Rosh Chodesh* or *Rosh Hashanah*, or even Shabbat. Anyone can make a *simcha* special. But to be able to create a meaningful, energetic, and respectful prayer service on a regular weekday is the sign of true religious devotion. I want to extend my thanks and a *yishar ko'ach* to the senior class and their *minyan* leader Rabbi Yigal Sklarin for making the ordinary special.

How to make *davening* meaningful to students is a significant challenge of modern Jewish education, and is being studied by top researchers in the field. A leading scholar is Prof. Saul Wachs, professor of Education and Liturgy at Gratz College. One of his areas of study is explaining why *davening* among children is generally strong in lower grades, but drops off precipitously in Middle School. Among his theories is that Lower School prayers are driven almost entirely by music, so that when children enter the teen years and many become self-conscious about singing, if their singing ends, so does their praying. The curricular response must therefore be to begin teaching the meaning behind prayers in the early years of Middle School. This way, *davening* becomes associated not only with tunes, but also with ideas, which will carry them forward if the music no longer can. I had the opportunity this week to see this theory in action in our Middle School, where Grade 5 teachers both engaged their students in the music of the *davening*, and took a step back to analyze the words and concepts behind the *tefillot* their students had been singing since kindergarten.

The exceptional Ramaz *Rosh Chodesh davening* about which my colleagues spoke, was on display last week at our Lower School. Rabbi Koslowe commented to me that in his view, one of the singular facets of Ramaz is that day school students are able to *daven* in the most magnificent sanctuary in Manhattan. The beauty of the music, words, and architecture combine to offer our students a *tefillah* experience that is unparalleled in the day school world.

On Thursday, we took advantage of the holy space of the KJ sanctuary to hold a special mincha service for Grades 6-12. For the past month, our brothers and sisters have endured terrorist attacks that have put them in a state of fear and anxiety, and have claimed the lives of innocents. In the Ramaz way, we reached out to God in song and prayer on behalf of the Jewish people. I want to thank Benjamin S. '16 for leading services with great *kavannah*, and to Jeremy G. '16, who led us beautifully in *Acheinu Kol Beit Yisrael*, the prayer for the deliverance of "Our Brothers, the entire House of Israel" who are in distress. Psalm 121 was recited by our Lower School Judaic studies teacher, Efrat Azar, who served in the IDF; "*Hatikvah*" was led by Rami Yadid, who also served in *Tzahal*, and whose son is currently a soldier in the Israel Defense Forces.

(Click [here](#) to view photos from the special mincha service.)

In his remarks before the service, Rabbi Lookstein spoke of the Jewish belief that prayer is efficacious. We pray because we believe that our *tefilot* have an impact - not only on the heavens, but on earth as well. Prayer moves God, and it also moves us. Watching our students singing, swaying, and praying together on Thursday affirmed for me the importance of having a school with a *shul*. And for anyone in Israel who was watching, it confirmed our unwavering commitment to them.

I am grateful to be part of a community that understands the power of prayer. As a new week begins, I ask that God answer our *tefilot*, and bless us and our land with peace.

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME , October 12, 2015

As I mentioned in my 72 questions video, I am a huge fan of Paul Simon's music. One of my favorite songs is Kodachrome (I liked the 35mm film as well) from his 1973 album, *There Goes Rhymin' Simon*. The song contains an unfortunate line about high school education, quoted ubiquitously in yearbooks, but I enjoy its pithy lyrics about the difference between perception and reality in how we view the world. (If you missed the 72 questions video, [click here](#).)

The song was originally supposed to be called *Goin' Home*, but Simon thought the concept was overdone. To me, however, the theme of "going home" is timeless and immune to overplay. There is a part of each of us that constantly yearns to be going home.

Last week, our Lower School participated in a joyous *hallel* service for *chol hamoed Sukkot*. It was truly inspirational to hear our students sing out the songs of the *davening*, see them wave their *lulavim* and

etrogim, and watch them dance to the lively music played by our talented musical team of Chaya Glaser and Avital Zagha. After the service, many participants told me that what made the *davening* extra special was that it was housed once again in the KJ sanctuary; our *tefillot* were uplifted by the spirit of coming home.

My conversations with students in the Upper School this week have had a similar theme, but from a different angle. Students told me repeatedly how ready they are to have a full week of school. While the duties of a full work week are daunting, there has been something unsettling about moving from place to place over the last month, never being in one location for long. The *sukkot* themselves are designed to enhance our feeling of displacement, forcing us out of our homes and reminding us of the wandering of our people in the desert before we reached our homeland. As we conclude *z'man simchateinu*, the season of our joy, we are reminded of the comfort of returning home again.

Our Middle School students are also excited to settle into their routine, including the much-anticipated annual return of our MS clubs. Clubs are a great place for students to feel at home while at school, surrounded and supported by peers with similar interests and passions. One of my goals this year is to help nurture this spirit of care and concern in all our programs and in all our divisions. For students coming to school every day, Ramaz is, and should feel like, their true home away from home.

On *Shemini Atzeret*, we read in the *haftarah* how King Solomon dismissed the people after the conclusion of *Sukkot*, and following the dedication of the Temple: "*On the eighth day he let the people go. They bade the king good-bye and went to their homes, joyful and glad of heart over all the goodness that the Lord had shown to His servant David and His people Israel.*"

When I read these verses, I like to read "the king" as "The King," as if, at the end of the holiday season, we bid good-bye to God, the King of Kings, as we return home. I look forward to the return to our routine this week, bringing back home with us the joy and inspiration of the *chagim*.

On a personal note, I am grateful to our amazing graphic designer Gary Finkler who brought to my attention that, very soon, I should be able to enjoy my own taste of home. You may also remember from the 72 questions that my favorite snack is Canadian All-Dressed Potato Chips. Check out this latest Canadian invasion:

<http://www.vancitybuzz.com/2015/09/all-dressed-chips-america-ruffles/>



Best wishes for a great week!

RABBI GROSSMAN'S REFLECTIONS, September 21, 2015

We are off and running! In a year where we mark the Opening of Doors, we have begun by throwing open the doors to all of our divisions, and watched our nearly 1,200 students stream through our entrances, ready and eager for a year of learning and growth.

Last week, in our Upper School, we welcomed our freshman parents back with an orientation that focused on our unique US guidance program that makes sure that every Ramaz high school student has the care and attention they need to thrive and succeed.

Our Middle School Simulated School Night opened with Morah Smadar musing that our new Educational Management System, Schoology, may be so good that it portends the arrival of the Messianic Age. While the usually reserved Morah may have been *slightly* over enthusiastic, Schoology is a great example of how technology can open doors to enhanced communication and relationships between our faculty and students.

I have had the joy of watching our Lower School math teachers collaborate over curriculum, and seeing the smiling faces of students bound down the wide and bright halls of their new building.

Students have already started working on homework, assignments, and preparing for assessments. So, as we begin to focus on our students' learning and achievements, it is always important to take a step back and reflect upon our mission as The Ramaz School.

Last week, I was speaking with Rabbi Lewitin outside my Middle School office and he asked me if I had seen the Sponge Bob video. Being a fan of Star Wars and other pop culture myself, I reserved judgment on the viewing habits of the pious rabbi! What he was referring to, however, was this video from the Jimmy Kimmel show that quickly went viral in the Orthodox community and the yeshiva day school world. If you have not seen it yet, click below:



The video raises complex questions about human nature, our indifference to suffering, and our numbness to others. For New Yorkers, it recalls the *cheshbon nefesh*, the soul searching following the Kitty Genovese murder of 1964. All important reflections during this High Holy Day season of repentance.

But for Orthodox Jews, and day school parents, the video was a triumph. I went home that night and showed the video to my boys and told them, "This is why we send you to a Jewish day school." I was not alone. The video was independent confirmation that the Torah values we are teaching have a deep impact on the life and behavior of our students.

I believe the video is also a reflection of our own values as Torah Jews. The video did not say anything about the academic achievement of the student who lifted up the fallen. We do not know if they are A, B, or C students, or what colleges, if any, they have been accepted to. I doubt the video would have achieved similar popularity if it was about the exceptional IQ, SAT, or ACT scores of three Jewish students. What moved us was the fact that, unprompted, the values they were taught in yeshiva imbued in them an instinct for *menschlichkeit*. In the end, we know this is the core principle that we are transmitting when we give our children a day school education.

I will end with an observation I heard from our Upper School outside security guard, John Santana. Mr. Santana told me that he notices a marked difference between Ramaz students and the students in the other schools he has worked at: our students always smile at him in the morning. While it may not make it to a viral video, these simple acts of kindness and positivity have a real impact on the world, and say everything about what Ramaz is all about.

Wishing you an easy fast and a *gmar chatima tova* and easy fast,