



2013 Graduation Speech

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We have spoken a great deal about the importance of technology and in providing a 21st century education for the 21st century student. This year, we will focus on the importance of educating our 21st century students to be part of a community, in our case, of course, the Jewish community. There is growing agreement among psychologists, scientists and educators that community is essential to both happiness and to preserving our 21st century planet Earth.

There is an article called, "Happiness Is..." by Bill McKibben, an American journalist and environmentalist. McKibben postulates that global warming is escalating faster than first assumed and that it must be controlled for the well being of the planet. He claims that happiness can be measured and that an increase in material goods and prosperity has not resulted in people's happiness, while at the same time, it has caused the rapidly increasing global warming crisis. He argues that going back to the basics with reliance on community will increase happiness while at the same time, make people less reliant on fossil fuels and technology, thus benefitting the environment. Who knew that the Hebrew philosophies of community and happiness that began 5773 years ago would become the solution to the most pressing environmental problem of the 21st century?

In their book, Jewish Clues to Health and Happiness, Sidney and Betty Jacobs write that, "Ironically, it's Judaism that has the answers to lead a happier life, reduce stress and improve relationships." Judaism celebrates life, with an emphasis on a spiritual relationship with God, a love of learning, a celebration of community, and the power of the individual to make righteous choices. As it is said in Deuteronomy, 30:19, "I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose Life." God has given his People the gift of choice and one of the choices offered every Jew, is the choice to be happy.

It should be no surprise to any of you that TWO of our five principles of academic excellence in our mission statement deal with this – **Creative and Healthy Lifestyles** and **Future of Life Long Jewish Learning**. The Jewish religion offers its adherents the potential of personal choice and happiness, a sense of real community as well as, McKibbens and his team claim, the potential to solve the 21st century's biggest scientific dilemma.

Think about our holiday, Purim. As lecturer, Rabbi Michael Gourarie, explains, it is the happiest holiday in the Jewish calendar. On this day we read the Purim story, have a festive meal, give food gifts to each other and help those in need. We are taught that on Purim we should celebrate with great festivity and happiness. Note, though, what was included in the celebration of this happiest of holidays – giving FOOD gifts to those close to us and helping those in need. I think that our Purim is EXACTLY what McKibbens is talking about when he says that "community" is one of the keys to the future. If McKibbens knew the word "tzedaka", I am sure he would be using it!!!

How odd, don't you think, that an ancient religion whose people were scattered in the Diaspora thousands of years ago and persecuted throughout history as well as throughout the world, should continue to rejoice in their faith, build strong families, and band together in community? Not odd at all, if you consider what the

nature of our religion is and how we have persevered. Isaac Bashevis Singer, beloved Polish-Jewish author of the last century, and Nobel Prize winner, said, “The Jewish people have been in exile for 2,000 years; they have lived in hundreds of countries, spoken hundreds of languages and still they kept their old language, Hebrew. They kept their Aramaic, later their Yiddish; they kept their books; they kept their faith. “ And here you are, Robbins Hebrew Academy graduating class of 2013, almost 6000 years after God presented the 10 commandments to Moses, STILL learning the Hebrew language and STILL learning the faith.

The stereotypical Jew, that monster born of prejudice, has long been depicted as a Shylock, looking for a pound of flesh, or as a person who values money above all else. How does this jibe with the view that happiness does not lie in material acquisition? Realize that a people who have been exiled for 2000 years, who have survived through the ages, through the Inquisition, through the Holocaust, has learned that money helps buy freedom and education, both of which have ensured the success of our people and of our religion.

But, our religion also teaches that happiness comes from within. Haman, the villain of the Purim story, took his happiness from his stature in the eyes of others. When Mordechai would not bow down to him, Haman had a melt down. He had everything he wished materially, but it obviously did not bring happiness. The triumph of Esther and Mordechai and the whole happiness of the simcha, is that our people were free to worship, to experience the light and the joy of Judaism, and to continue to be a community together.

Look at Tevye, the milkman, in Fiddler on the Roof. In “If I Were a Rich Man”, his last and biggest dream is the ability to sit in the synagogue and pray, to be able to spend his time learning. As a Mom, about to see my son marry this summer, I think about the joy and the happiness of family in Sunrise Sunset. That is the history and the future of our people: learning, family, community, joy. Our unique heritage might be exactly what the world needs right now.

You are the lucky ones. You are Jewish youth whose parents chose to give you an education at Robbins Hebrew Academy. You have benefitted not only from the incredible lessons and educational values of our Jewish religion, but also from the wonderful partnerships in our community that have sustained our school for the last 53 years. Know that everyone involved in our school has been an active part of your education from the Board of Governors, to the Faculty and Administration and to YOUR parents. All of us have worked together to fulfill the Jewish ideal – a warm, caring and welcoming educational community, that has provided you with not only the best education possible, but, more importantly, the best JEWISH education.

So this year, my wish for you, the graduating class of 2013, is that you go forward, pursue your education with the best effort that you can and make the most of your life. Remember, that as a Jew, you have choices. You can choose to preserve this wonderful religion and community that you were born into. You can choose to value family life and be a giving member of your community. You can choose to make a difference in your chosen career, whatever it might be and you can choose to be happy. In doing so, you all might just save the world!

I wish you all the best and happiness in your futures!