

A Conversation with Leo

We sit here at the Hebrew Academy dinner tonight in the year 2011, 49 years after our school was established. Now, some of us were not alive in 1962. For just a moment, let's think back to the years surrounding the founding of Bet Shraga in order to point out how counter-intuitive and counter-cultural it was to found a Jewish day school in Albany.

Albany already had a great Jewish educational institution that was producing committed and motivated graduates who went on to do great things. It was called Temple Israel Educational Center. Albany's Jewish community was considered too small to provide enough students for a Jewish day school. Other communities with day schools at the time were much larger.

Sending your child to public school was considered by many to be a way of fulfilling your civic duty as an American, which meant that starting a day school, or sending your child to one, was un-American.

Under these circumstances, a compelling case needed to be made for what a day school would do for a child, for a family, and for a community that the other Jewish educational options could never do. Leo Phaff developed that vision and articulated it, and the day school got off the ground, people signed on and signed their children up, and the rest is history.

So, Leo, I ask you tonight in 2011, when you started this school almost 50 years ago- is this what you had in mind?

Were you searching for students who ask the greatest questions, think critically about issues and love to learn? Students who speak Hebrew, who sing the songs of Mishna and Tefilah as they walk through the halls. Students who study a full load of advanced General and Judaic studies courses and then stay after school for basketball, school band and school play and only then do they return home – but still with enough time for their personal chesed projects like raising money for Israel, collecting supplies for the Ronald McDonald house, and volunteering at the food pantry. Did you envision a school Math team that beats the local public schools who are 12 times our size and an Olympics of the Visual Arts team that year after year, wins 1st place in the state competition?

Did you expect to have parents like Laura Segal devoting years of their lives to leadership on the board, supporting the administration, and recruiting and fundraising and volunteering in and out of the classroom, morning afternoon and evening, weekdays and weekends, during the school year and throughout the summer? Year after year after year? Parents who dream about the school and obsess over seeing it succeed?

Could you have imagined hiring a stellar faculty who cares passionately for its students, and is relentless in seeking their academic progress, social and emotional growth and a deep student teacher relationship? This would be a group who attend after-school events, and bnai mitzvah celebrations, a staff that

doesn't give a second thought to remaining after school with students who need extra help.

Could you have dreamed that the 8th grade would one day have a class trip - as part of their curriculum- to Eretz Yisrael, our Nation's homeland to practice speaking the Hebrew they learned at Bet Shraga, daven at the Kotel, eat falafel and shwarma, dig up archeological specimens that haven't been touched for 2000 years, hike Masada, float in the dead sea, walk the same roads as King David and stand in the same room where Ben Gurion declared that Medinat Yisrael would be the Jewish State?

Was your vision to produce graduates who become the class presidents and valedictorians in high school? Graduates who go to the finest colleges, travel to Israel to serve in the IDF and who make it their life goal to make a difference in this world. Alumni who serve as advisers to the Presidents of the US and others who travel to Africa to teach poverty-stricken school children about hygiene?

Was your intention to produce a quantity and quality of Jewish leadership for the next generation, well out of proportion to our actual size? Did you foresee that Hebrew Academy alumni would lead the most successful Jewish Day schools in America?

I would imagine, Leo, that in many ways, Bet Shraga has exceeded your wildest expectations - that a real, and exciting, and far-reaching, and life-changing Jewish education in Albany, BECAUSE OF YOU, changed from a dream into a reality. Tonight we honor you— and Laura Segal who kept your vision alive, and Rodney Margolis who supports and protects the stability of our institution because without you we would not be here right now.

A Jew begins his day with the word *modeh*, I thank, even before he says the word *ani* referring to himself. In addition, the word *yehudim* is from the word *todah*, we are a thanking nation. When I was in Israel 2 weeks ago with our 8th graders we went to show our *hakarat hatov* to the many soldiers who gave up their lives so that Klal Yisrael could continue to exist and tonight. In the spirit of *hakarat hatov*, of saying thank you, to those deserving, and in the spirit of inspiring the next generation of vibrant, knowledgeable, dedicated, and proud Jews, we say *Todah Rabbah* - from the bottom of our hearts, thank you and *mazal tov*.