



In This Issue

Sukkah Fair – Reunion in Israel ✦ Partner Portraits	2
Letter from the Principal ✦ Penguin Panorama	3
5 Questions with Baila Brackman & Barbara Simon	4-5
Spaghetti Dinner ✦ Torah of Kindness	6
Where Are They Now?	7



Celebrating Our Community



Sukkah Fair

6th grader demonstrate what makes a kosher Sukkah:

- ✨ Walls can be made of anything.
- ✨ The roof has to be made of something from the ground, but not attached to the ground.
- ✨ At least 3 walls.
- ✨ Maximum 30 feet tall, minimum 40 inches.
- ✨ The roof must allow for more shade than sun.

Akiba-Schechter Reunion in Israel

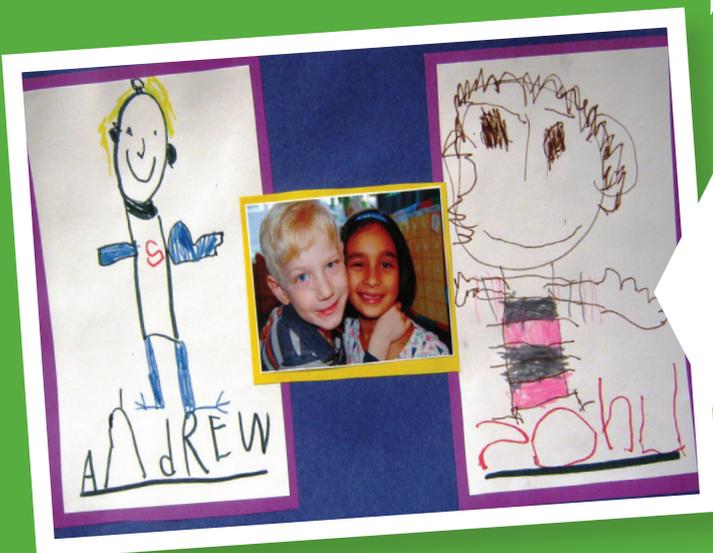
The Ginzler/Keysar Family (Tomer - 6th and Avi - 3rd), currently on sabbatical in Israel, recently sent this message: "Although we are seemingly far away, Akiba is always with us. A few weeks ago, we had an amazing Akiba Family Reunion Trip to the North. This trip was the brainchild of Alona and Shahar Bin-Nun, whose children were at Akiba several years ago. We stayed at the Har Meron field school, hiked to the Bar'am forest and had the time of our lives together! The first night when we arrived, we opened our best bottle of wine ("Shoresh" from the Tsora winery near Jerusalem) and raised our glasses in a toast to congratulate Mr. Salk!"



Toasting Mr. Salk in Israel, from left to right: Avi and Boaz Keysar, the Ayal-Ovadia Family: Tal holding Alon, Roie, Yael, Oded; the Bin-Nun Family: Adam, Alona holding Inbar, Amit, Ohad, Shahar; Tomer Keysar. Not pictured: Linda Ginzler and the Lichtenstein Family: Sasha, Lev, Noam, Tomer and Yael.

Partner Portraits

Children are continually learning about themselves and others through portraiture is a regular feature in all our classes. Recently, the 4-year-olds in the Peach Room worked with a classmate to create partner portraits. They will continue to do partner work throughout the school year to practice social and play skills in small groups and to get to know other children with whom they might not regularly play. In this project, each student sat down with his or her partner to create a portrait of him or her, and to deal with difficulties like, "How do I draw a white shirt?"





The Akiba-Schechter flag flies over McMurdo Station in Antarctica.

Dear Akiba-Schechter Family and Friends,

A couple of weeks ago, in Mrs. Rapp's 1st/2nd grade classroom, I overheard a girl saying to the boy beside her: "At my old school we quit playing in Kindergarten." They were working on the latest addition to their penguin unit – painting two-liter pop bottles to create 3-D penguins for the habitat they were making.

This comment was bittersweet for me. Bitter because it's sad that a child believes that learning and playing are two different things. Sweet because I realized the gift we are giving this child – and how different her approach to learning will be now.

Sometimes, immersed in the everyday hubbub of the school, I forget how special we are. While many assume that learning in Kindergarten is play based, they also assume that "formal learning" begins in 1st grade, and play should be over. Our 1st/2nd grade classrooms do not have desks all in a row and there is little "frontal" teaching. We don't believe in hours of homework. We do believe that learning should be organic, creative and fun. It is never okay to "quit playing."

Jackie Rapp and Scott Salk, our 1st and 2nd grade teachers, embody this philosophy. Every year Mrs. Rapp initiates fabulous, in-depth, problem-based learning projects, ranging from building bridges to creating a mini-economy to studying penguins. Each project incorporates a myriad of skills – reading, writing, math, geography and science.

Mr. Salk's classroom has a different feel, but the guiding philosophy is the same: learning is fun. Children are just as busy and actively involved in their learning, and the curriculum is shaped by their needs and interests. They learn to cooperate with one another, help one another and learn from each other. In essence, they become a community. That community aspect is important to us and manifests itself in events that bring families to the school, such as the Thanksgiving Feasts in the Pre-School and the all-school Grandparents & Special Friends Day. It also comes alive during a typical school day, in the Buddies program, or during Sukkot, when everybody enjoys lunch together in the Sukkah that the children helped build and decorate.

We are happy that recognizing Akiba-Schechter's excellence goes beyond our own community. This year, Mr. Salk has been recognized by the Associated Talmud Torahs (ATT) and the Hartman Family Foundation as the Educator of the Year. The \$15,000 prize rewards dedication, innovation, and commitment to lifelong learning, and was recently presented at the ATT Annual Banquet. We are proud of Mr. Salk and grateful that we are not the only ones who appreciate how outstanding he is!

As you read through these pages, I hope you'll see why we never "quit playing" at Akiba-Schechter—no matter how old we get, and why fostering our community brings such joy.

Warm regards,

Miriam Schiller



Penguin Panorama

For four months, the students in Mrs. Rapp's 1st and 2nd grade have lived and breathed penguins. Learning about what they eat and do and how and where they live. They have drawn penguins, built penguins and baked penguin sugar cookies. They have explored the Internet, presented oral reports and listened to a guest speaker—a University of Chicago graduate student who was preparing for her expedition to the South Pole. They asked questions such as, "If you throw your leftover coffee outside at the South Pole, will it freeze mid-air?" Now they are corresponding via email with this explorer during her 3-month expedition. In fact, the expedition's team members set up a web-cam for everybody at Akiba to watch penguins, and Mrs. Rapp's students have adopted one of them. Snowy has laid two eggs and the children watched them hatch. All along, our 1st and 2nd graders have been recording their data day by day, in their journals, just as scientists should.



5 Questions with...

Baila Brackman, Middle School Judaic Studies Teacher

Q> Looking back from when you started, has Akiba turned out to be what you expected?

A< From the beginning I felt ease and warmth and a closeness among the students and staff. It was exactly as I expected. For my husband and me, the sun shines on Akiba. Having a Jewish school in Hyde Park is incredible. We were proud ambassadors for Akiba even before I taught here.

Q> Do you sometimes feel like you live in a Jewish exile in Hyde Park, given that you're far from the bigger communities up north?

A< Sadly, others often don't even know there's a community here. I always say: Hyde Park is like a vine – it grows on you. I love this small neighborhood in a big city, the academic aspect and the variety of people. Living here gives us a unique opportunity to teach. If my son is running around the park wearing his kipa, and someone asks him about it, he can teach someone about Judaism. No one would ask him that question on the North side.

Q> What is your teaching philosophy?

A< I like to do fun, hands-on activities with the kids that show how Judaism is part of every day life, such as making candy apples for Rosh Hashana. I also like to do projects where the kids learn



Baila Brackman making candy apples for Rosh Hashana with her 5th graders.

about giving. For Chanukah each year, we build a menorah out of items that we later donate. We've created a "canorah" (made of food cans), a "toynora" (made of toys) and this year we built one from books.

Q> If you weren't teaching Judaic Studies, what would you teach?

A< I don't know what I would do. I think I was born to teach and help others. It's what I grew up with and what I hope to inspire my children to do.

Q> What do you do in your spare time?

A< I don't think there is such a thing as spare time but I make time for my walks. My mother has 13 children but she taught us that you need time for yourself. Walking is a must for me, and often I accomplish that by walking to Akiba.





Barbara Simon in the Purple Room during the Thanksgiving Feast.

...and Barbara Simon, Pre-School Founder and Purple Room Teacher

Q> Looking back from when you first started the pre-school, are you where you envisioned you would be?

A< Absolutely. Being a teacher is extremely rewarding, and I feel content and fortunate to do what I do. It brings me such joy when former students return with children of their own and I teach generations.

Q> If there is one thing you want children taking away from you, what would it be?

A< I want them to love going to and being at school. I want to make sure school is fun and rewarding for them.

Q> What do you consider to be your biggest accomplishments?

A< Having a wonderful family, running a marathon and of course the success of the pre-school. I want to see Akiba grow bigger and better with each year.

Q> If you could pick any superpower what would you be?

A< Elastigirl from *The Incredibles*. I wouldn't have to move as much to chase the children around. I'd stretch to where I need to be at any given point.

Q> What does being a mentor to the younger teachers mean to you? What do you want them to learn from you?

A< I love to mentor teachers, even if it doesn't look like mentoring. I want them to have energy and feel confident evaluating what they do, so that they can do it better and be proud of what they are accomplishing with these kids. I always tell teachers to go back and look at what we did last week, and ask, "Does it work? What could we have done better or what should we change for the future?"

A 3-D faceted ball created by a 4th grader by decorating, folding and cutting a pattern of 20 equilateral triangles and assembling them with clear tape.



The Torah of Kindness

By Rabbi Jeffrey Holman, Director of Judaic Studies

Is there a deeper understanding to "Love your neighbor as you love yourself" beyond simple common sense? Why did Rabbi Akiva declare this as a central theme of the Torah? Why did Hillel summarize the whole Torah "on one foot" in a similar vein?

When Abraham first realized the truth of monotheism, he asked himself, "If G-d needs nothing, then why did He create us?" He reasoned that G-d must be all good and thus desired to create mankind so as to have someone to give to. What then could be the greatest good that we could give? Abraham realized that the greatest possible good could only be G-d Himself, or emulating G-d's ways, namely unending kindness. Thus, he dedicated his life to helping others – inviting guests, planting orchards, digging wells, promoting justice, etc. In this way, he felt, he could be like G-d.

Torat Chesed – the Torah of Kindness – is what our Akiba-Schechter students study and practice. Torah classes focus on finding those messages that promote ethical growth. In the hallways, in the lunchroom and on the playground, the children can be seen treating each other with respect and empathy. The older students lead and teach their younger "buddies" at many holiday activities. But chesed extends beyond school: The children collect food and tzedakah money, make sandwiches for the homeless, and pack Maot Chittim boxes for the needy for Rosh Hashana and Pesach. In all of these ways, they create a truly living Torah.



The Spaghetti Dinner is Back

For those in the Akiba family who fondly remember the all-school Spaghetti Dinners of the 1990s, we are happy to report that the Dinner is back, thanks to the Parent Network. Founded three years ago, the Parent Network works tirelessly to create bonding opportunities for parents, although by now the school has grown so much that the Dinner had to be restricted to grades 1-4. "Don't worry," says Leslie Landman, co-chair of the Parent Network, "we have a fun event planned for the middle school families as well."



Feeling connected to the school has been found to impact not only retention, but also families' general feeling of satisfaction and involvement, and thus helps to create a positive school experience for the children. "One of the ways that Akiba-Schechter is unique is its geographic diversity. But it also presents a challenge in creating a cohesive parent community," says Ms. Landman. The Parent Network offers many ways to connect. A yahoo group provides an online space to exchange news, announce a bris or shiva or ask whether another family can lend dress shoes for a performance. Some events are organized around Jewish holidays, such as the Sukkah hops

in three different neighborhoods; others are education-themed such as the recent "Creating a Positive School Environment" program. Events are hosted at the school or at a parents' home elsewhere in the city. The Parent Network also manages Teacher Appreciation Week, helps with fundraising by collecting Box Tops and sells Akiba wear to fund its programming. Has it all worked? "We try many different things, some are successful, others resonate less, but we keep trying to see what works," says Landman. "One thing is for sure: A venue exists that didn't exist before, and connections are being made that otherwise wouldn't."

Where are they now?

Elisheva Coleman & the Family Business

“Home was Akiba, and Akiba was home.” With both parents working at Akiba-Schechter, Elisheva Coleman remembers it as much more than a school. Her memories include typical Akiba experiences such as playing hide-and-peek during Shabbatons, making a grand entrance down a ladder in a cloud of smoke as Fruma Sarah, the crazy ghost in *Fiddler* and being refused a paperclip by Rose Miller because staples were cheaper.

“The fact that both my parents worked at Akiba meant that it was much more than just where I went to school. It was the family business and was fairly all-consuming. Yet it was surprisingly positive and uncomplicated.” However, she did not receive special treatment; in fact, her father gave her the worst grade of her academic career. The B- was well-deserved and caused an awakening for her. She also remembers her 7th grade Talmud class as mind-blowing, kindling a passion for the study of the Talmud for years to come. Between high school and college, she spent a year studying at the Midreshet Lindenbaum in Jerusalem.

Elisheva Coleman is currently completing her internship year in Internal Medicine at Northwestern Memorial Hospital and plans to start a Neurology residency next year.

Looking back, Elisheva appreciates that she was able to take advanced coursework without skipping grades, which would have been socially difficult. This allowed her to explore intellectually in a safe space, which has fostered a curiosity that has stayed with her. After graduating from Akiba in 1996, she attended Ida Crown Jewish Academy and matriculated to Princeton University, graduating with a degree in history. She knew then that she wanted a tangible career where she could give back and interact with others and continued on to the Albert Einstein School of Medicine.



Today, Elisheva is completing her internship year in Internal Medicine at Northwestern Memorial Hospital and plans to start a Neurology residency next year. She has several scientific publications under her belt, but she's also remained down-to-earth: She headed Einstein's cooking club "Unami" and she's known to be a wine and whiskey connoisseur like her father.



Akiba-Schechter Jewish Day School
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Save the Date!

Annual Benefit Dinner and Silent Auction honoring

Rabbi Elliot B. Gertel



March 18, 2012 @ 5:00 p.m.
Palmer House Hotel

"And you shall teach your children..." (Deut. 6:7)

On March 18, 2012, Akiba-Schechter will be honoring Rabbi Elliot B. Gertel of Congregation Rodfei Zedek at its Annual Benefit Dinner and Silent Auction for his commitment and support of Jewish education. "I came to Hyde Park in 1988, the same year Miriam Schiller did," he recently reflected, "and it's been heartening to see how the school has grown into a vibrant institution that not only transformed itself, but set a pace for the community at large. I attribute today's spirit of cooperation between the synagogues, Hillel, JCC and Akiba-Schechter directly to the school's success." Rabbi Gertel has served on the school's board for many years, and has always supported and advocated for Akiba-Schechter. His community spirit is no less impressive; one small example of his versatility is that he wrote the words and music to a hymn that debuted at this year's Thanksgiving Interfaith Service at the University of Chicago's Rockefeller Chapel. Rabbi Gertel sees the knowledge of Hebrew as key to Jewish education: "Jews need to be knowledgeable enough to take an active part in *mesorah* (the handing down of tradition), and not just be taught 'from above.' A day school like Akiba-Schechter will always be the most intensive way to impart that knowledge."