



Who We Are and Who We Hope To Be:

REFLECTIONS ON ONE YEAR OF PARENTHOOD, HARRY POTTER, AND TU B'SHEVAT

by Rabbi Jaclyn Cohen,
Assistant Rabbi

For the past few years, Josh and I have participated in a very special cross-country book reading competition. Originally conceived by my close friends who felt their free time was too heavily focused on Facebook and Twitter, this annual contest pushes its winner to read the most pages in a six-month period. “The Book-Off” is all on the honor system and what you read is completely up to you. You log each book in an online form once you’ve finished it, offer a short critique of what you’ve read and the option of recommending it to another participant, and hope and pray you’ve read more pages than any

other competitor by December 31. The winner gets a prize from each participant; offered in dramatic fashion before the competition begins, we call it “the ante.”

I fell a bit off the radar last December as my due date neared (my friends will tell you it should have been the opposite - that I could have won. Ha!) but this year I was determined to rise to the occasion and, at the very least, break 3,000 pages. And so, I pushed myself to read all seven original Harry Potter books for the very first time. Yes, *the very first time!* When the first book was published in the US in 1998 – nearly two decades ago! – it simply wasn’t on my radar. None of my close friends were into the series. Years went by, blockbuster movies were made, and I still had no clue what all the fuss was about.

It’s hard to put into words what it felt like to finish the seventh book this past Thanksgiving. This tale with which millions around the world have fallen in love captivated me – this epic saga of love, loss and responsibility. I am certainly not the first to see Harry Potter as a universal story with a distinctly Jewish message, but it was impossible not to read enduring messages of *tikkun olam* (repair of the world), *yetzer ha’tov & yetzer ha’ra* (the good/evil inclinations) and overtures to the Third Reich within its pages.

But the most powerful message I gathered – one that, quite frankly, floored me – was that of *l’dor va’dor* – from generation to generation. From the outside I thought this was a story of friendship, and indeed the bond between Harry, Hermione

and Ron is significant to a reader of any age. But the gravity with which this book approached the concept of family – and specifically, parenthood – was something no one could have prepared me for. I found it particularly meaningful how these seven books handle the expectations we place on our children – as human beings, as students and scholars, and as worthy carriers of our legacy into the generations to come. It struck me deeply, especially as Josh and I prepare to celebrate our son’s first birthday.

Yes, it’s hard to believe our son entered the world over one year ago, and what a year it has been! So many of you told us how overwhelming and incredible that first year of parenthood can be, and you were right. In fact, Josh and I now possess new insight over a child’s first birthday: it’s not about our kid *at all*. It’s about us parents celebrating and whooping it up because we survived the first year! Hats off to us and Hagrid-sized bear hugs all around!

But now we are looking past year one, toward the next seventeen birthdays and far beyond those. Today we look at photos of our beloved son from just one year ago and realize how significantly he has changed – and how we, in turn, have grown as parents. God willing, our child will keep growing: developing into the boy, teenager, young man and adult he will eventually become. That he has a loving community surrounding him has always been significant to us, and indeed it colored the difficult decision we made to return to Los Angeles this coming summer. But the community

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that makes up our son's world is far greater than family alone – it's also the people who impact his life in countless ways: buddies, peers and their parents, our closest friends and their children, beloved congregants who have supported and nurtured us, and most importantly, teachers.

In the void created by his parents' death, Harry receives guidance from many: from his best friend's parents to his godfather to – most significantly – his teachers at Hogwarts. Harry forges deep, complex bonds with those who shape his intellect and morality. As he matures over the course of seven books it becomes abundantly clear just how much his professors – especially Dumbledore – have impacted him, leading to triumph in the final, brilliant conclusion of the series.

Many of us can look back on our life's journey and recall a handful of teachers who made a lasting impact on our development. Some of us can recall at least one whose devotion beyond the walls of a classroom made a lasting imprint on our souls. For me, that teacher was Mrs. Frost, my teacher in first and third grades. Mrs. Frost (I still can't bring myself to call her by her first name, Paula) will forever be the person who taught me not only cursive writing, but empathy, compassion, kindness and honesty, too. She is still a big part of my life and I can only hope my son

is fortunate enough to have a Mrs. Frost in his future.

Equally so, the education we provide at Temple De Hirsch Sinai – from Kisses & Knishes to Livnot Chai to Endless Opportunities – is focused not only on facts and history, but on teaching our children (and adults) to be mensches. Everything we teach at Temple, starting from the time our children are newborns, is focused on raising individuals to be the best human beings they can possibly be. In that way we mirror the message of Tu B'Shevat, the Jewish "Earth Day" we celebrate in February. Tu B'Shevat recognizes the official beginning of spring. It focuses on Earth's many gifts, carrying with it a message of planting seeds for the future: that which we "harvest" at the turning of a season was planted months, if not years before.

Similarly, Jewish learning is long-term planning at its best. We plant seeds in our children's souls and minds so that they can flourish – under tender love and care – in the years to come. We teach children not only the information they need to become scholars of Jewish thought, proficient leaders of prayer or masters of the Hebrew language; we also nurture their souls from the time they are young so they will blossom into the good human beings we want them to become.

And so, this issue of Tidings is dedicated to just that: the educational journey that begins when our children are young. The seeds that we plant when we choose how to direct their learning. The teachers who mold and shape young, forming minds. The programs we offer that build community not just amongst students, but their families, as well.

The message of *l'dor va'dor* truly comes alive at Temple De Hirsch Sinai and I couldn't be prouder to be a partner in that initiative.

So let us look to new opportunities on the horizon for learning, growth and relationship building for all ages. Let us celebrate the ability to learn freely and nurture minds young and not-so-young. Let us experience the joy of community and let us relish the magic (Harry-Potter-inspired or not!) that exists here at Temple.

L'shalom,

Rabbi Jaclyn Cohen

Rabbi Jaclyn Cohen arrived at Temple in 2014 as an Assistant Rabbi. She is proud to serve as rabbinic liaison for The Tribe, Temple's hub of Jewish life for those in their 20s and 30s, as well as The Village, our Young Families Engagement initiative. She rocks out every fourth Friday of the month as lead singer of Nefesh, the Fourth Shabbat jazz/folk/rock band she founded. Born and raised in Los Angeles, she is the proud wife of Joshua and mommy of Avi Samuel, who turned one on December 19th, 2016.



The Tribe

Our spiritual, social and educational hub of Jewish life for Jews in their 20s and 30s. For more info, reach out to Rabbi Jaclyn Cohen at jcohen@tdhs-nw.org