

Family Focus

'Model Educator' Wins Many Kudos

Yeshivat Akiva's Rivkah Nachlas makes learning come alive.

Yeshivat Akiva kindergarten teacher Rivkah Nachlas was recently awarded the annual Grinspoon-Steinhardt Award for Excellence in Jewish Education. The award recognizes outstanding teachers who have demonstrated an exemplary commitment to Jewish education.

In nominating Nachlas, Early Childhood Director and Akiva parent Lisa Parshan called her "a model Jewish educator who epitomizes the image of a kindergarten teacher. She is able, in a classroom full of energetic young children, to instruct using soft tones and is always equipped with an arsenal of multiple instructional tricks so she can reach every student with interactive and engaging lessons."

Nachlas, who has taught at Akiva in Southfield for 16 years, is known for her creativity. Former students attest to keeping their kindergarten projects on display more than a decade after graduating from her class and they still recall songs she taught them.

Walk into her class on a given Friday, when she teaches the weekly Torah portion, and you might encounter a group of 5-year-old Israelites crossing the Sea of Reeds or you may find yourself an honored guest at the wedding of Rebecca and Isaac.

In addition to bringing the weekly Torah portion alive for students, Nachlas teaches foundational skills for reading and writing Hebrew, Hebrew vocabulary, customs of Jewish holidays and the Jewish calendar. Her lessons provide the critical foundation upon which Judaic studies will be taught in future grades.

Nachlas credits her mother for inspiring her lifelong passion for Jewish education. Her parents wanted to enroll Rivkah and her siblings in a Jewish day school but, at the time, this was a financial impossibility. Her mother, at Nachlas' grandfather's suggestion, opened her own Hebrew school, with Rivkah and her brother as its first two students. Over

the next 16 years, the school grew to more than 100 students with Rivkah's mother serving as its volunteer director.

Nachlas was quick to follow in her mother's footsteps.

"As soon as I became competent enough to hold a piece of chalk, I applied for a job for myself — teacher's assistant — and more than 30 years later, I am proud to still be a Jewish educator," she said.

Nachlas is married to Yisroel Nachlas and together they have nine children as well as a growing extended family of grandchildren. Several of their children are following in Rivkah's path, serving as community educators in the United States, Canada and Argentina as emissaries of Chabad Lubavitch.

"This is the second consecutive year in which an Akiva teacher has earned the Grinspoon-Steinhardt award," said Mark Nadel, Akiva parent and school past president. "The recognition attests to the caliber of the educators teaching our children."

Yeshivat Akiva will honor Nachlas at a ceremony in early fall.

"I experience great joy and fulfillment from teaching," Nachlas said. "Teaching for me is a personal mission. I am charged with the responsibility of instilling in my young students a love of learning and a pride in who they are — values I hope they will carry with them into the future." □



Teacher Rivkah Nachlas ushers in "parents" Chaya Benjamin and Joseph Korman who escort "bride" Hannah Klei during a re-enactment of the biblical wedding of Rebecca to Isaac.