

**The Mitzvah Program
at the Martin J. Gottlieb Day School:**

**Interdisciplinary Integration
Through Service Learning
for Middle School Students**



November 2017

Introduction

In Pirke Avot it is written: “You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.”

“הוא הִיא אוֹמֵר, לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לְגַמֵּר, וְלֹא אַתָּה בֶּן חוֹרִין לְבָטֵל מִמֶּנָּה”

The *mitzvah program* has been an integral part of providing individualized service learning opportunities to middle schoolers at the [Martin J. Gottlieb Day School](#) for over 22 years. The concept was based on the idea that after students studied Tanach, Jewish laws and customs, they were more likely to understand and accept the mitzvot if given the opportunity to put them into practice. It was also believed that every student within our diverse student body should be provided the opportunity to become part of their community at large--with service projects enabling them to understand both their responsibility to the community and their ability to make a difference even at the young age of 11. The program provides experiences that encourage the social and emotional growth of each student as they begin to understand the social, cultural and economic issues facing communities around the world and discover their own roles within these broader communities. Engaging students of all abilities helps each individually understand the need for **their** service and participation in community service projects. Finally, integrating these lessons on mitzvot with language arts, math, health, art, and technology lessons would make them a well-rounded learning experience. With these ideas in mind the *mitzvah program* was launched. In the ensuing years the program has grown along with the number of organizations both locally and nationally it partners with.

As part of the middle school program students study text in class Mondays through Thursdays. On Fridays they take these lessons and put them to practice in the community. Each week, two and a half hours are devoted to hands-on projects. Students in the 6th and 7th grades experience a wide range of projects depending on the mitzvah they are studying. They also participate in one project that repeats monthly throughout the year. In order to more fully realize the impact their actions have, 8th grade students dedicate most of their time to one project. All 6th through

8th grade students jointly participate in holiday-related projects. Students also have the opportunity to participate in some projects based on their own personal interests. In each instance, students learn to harness their own abilities and passions and apply them in a way that only they can.

Integration occurs in many ways and with many subjects. Students read novels that highlight the issues we are addressing through the mitzvah program. So, for example, while studying Jewish laws about suicide, 8th grade students read *The Burn Journal* and explore one young man's attempted suicide. All students write weekly journal entries as a way of reflecting on their experiences while developing their writing skills. Students are required to use math skills as they make purchases with a budget in mind. They have to learn how to make choices to get the best value for their money. Technology skills are integrated consistently for blogging, digital photography, graphing and more. Science comes to play when we plant for Tu B'Shvat and consider the health benefits of food products. As the students work as individuals, in small groups, and with multiple faculty members, each student has a differentiated experience that provides them the opportunity for personal growth.

While it would be impossible to detail all of the projects we have done, the agencies we have partnered with, and the integrated lessons we have held through the years, the following highlights a selection of ongoing projects.

Ba'al Taschit, בל תשחית, Do Not Needlessly Waste

In 6th grade, students study the mitzvah of Ba'al Taschit, בל תשחית, Do not needlessly waste. Their study begins with the verse *When you lay siege on a city, making war against it, do not destroy it's trees.*, כִּי-תָצוּר אֶל-עִיר יָמִים רַבִּים לְהִלָּחֶם עָלֶיהָ, לֹא-תִשְׁחִית אֶת-עֵצָהּ. (Deutoronomy 20:19). Students follow this verse as it is discussed in the Mishnah, the Gemara, the Mishnah Torah and the Shulchan Aruch. As they follow the verse, they learn how it has come to mean that we should not needlessly waste anything and how they can individually relate to that concept. We then explore how to apply this law in the modern world. We discuss food waste and how many people could benefit if useable food was not thrown

away. Over the past 22 years, volunteering at local organizations, including *Second Harvest Food Bank*, *Waste Not Want Not*, *The Max Block Food Pantry at JFCS*, and *Feeding Northeast Florida*, students have been able to really experience this mitzvah and how meaningful it is.

When we go to Feeding America we pack bags of food to give to the poor. If we did not go and volunteer our time Feeding America would not be able to distribute the food. The food comes in large boxes and needs to be bagged and ready for each family.

The food that Feeding America has are fruits and vegetables. These items can be expensive but are important for everyone to eat. The poor usually do not have the money to buy healthy foods because they are more expensive.

This mitzvah makes me feel proud that I am able to give my time and help out.

I would like to speak to the owner of the camp that my mom works at and see if there is an opportunity for us to donate extra food to a homeless shelter in Honesdale, PA. This shelter is about 30 minutes away from camp.

Noam B., 6th grade

Students also survey local restaurants to find out what they do with leftovers. Do they throw them away or donate them? We have created a spreadsheet that we update year after year in order to track changes in our local foodservice industry's practices. This has become a favorite project for students as they go out and interview restaurant managers, encouraging them to donate rather than throw food away. An added benefit to this project is that students learn how to properly approach and interview individuals, encourage them to donate leftover food, and finally, the students document their findings.

Another interesting opportunity to observe the mitzvah of Ba'al Taschit is our volunteer work at [*Dignity U Wear*](#). *Dignity U Wear* is non-profit organization in Jacksonville whose goal is to match usable clothing donated by manufacturers, distributors, and retailers with individuals in need. Clothing is donated as a result of excess inventory, samples, cancellations, logo overruns, and seasonal merchandise. While the clothing is distributed through social service agencies, it is sorted by volunteers. Our middle school students sort perfectly useful clothing that has been rescued from disposal so that it can be distributed to those in need. Our students experience firsthand the mitzvah of Ba'al Taschit.

Kibbud Z'kaynim, כבוד זקנים, Honor the Elderly

The mitzvah of Kibbud Z'kaynim, כבוד זקנים, Honor the Elderly, is also introduced in the 6th grade and continues through the middle school years.

Studying verses in the Torah like :



מפני שיבה תקום, והדרת פני זקן.

“You shall rise up before the hoary head, and honour the face of the old man” (Leviticus 19:32) and “Honor your father and mother” (Exodus 20:12) וְאֶת-אָבִיךָ, וְאֶת-אִמְךָ our students learn the importance of respect for our elders. After studying the mitzvah in class, students get

hands-on practice as they volunteer at [River Garden Hebrew Home](#), [Mt. Carmel Gardens](#) and [The Jewish Healing Network at JFCS](#). Special projects for the holidays like honey cake and Shalach Manot deliveries allow students to visit seniors throughout Jacksonville. Strong bonds are often formed as students have the opportunity to visit the same seniors many times during their years in the middle school. Each time, students flourish as they contribute in their own way and work in small groups to encourage social and emotional growth. A very special project is “Shabbat in a Bag.” This project was actually the idea of an 8th grade student who wanted to spend every Friday bringing Shabbat to seniors and homebound adults. The students bake small challot and then pack bags with challah, grape juice and candles. Parent volunteers drive the students to deliver these bags along with good wishes for Shabbat to the elderly in the community.



For our mitzvah trip this week, some of the 8th graders delivered Shabbat-in-a-bags. Shabbat-in-a-bag is a bag with homemade challah, candles, and grape juice. We delivered the bags to elderly people in our community.

Shabbat-in-a-bag is the mitzvah of gemilut chesed, random acts of kindness, and kibud zekenim, honoring the elderly. This mitzvah is so important because elderly people can get lonely and our short visits will often make their day, or even their week! I love doing this mitzvah because it puts a smile on the elderly people's faces.

Jasmine M., 8th grade

This year our 7th grade students are participating in an ongoing project with seniors living at *River Garden Hebrew Home*. Working together with our STEAM team students are developing relationships with the seniors so that they can identify problems unique to the elderly. They will then be challenged to create something that will address and hopefully solve the problem. Students hope to design and create their solutions on the 3D printer at school and then present them to the seniors. This project is new to us this year and we are excited about the possible results. Even if we are not able to create the physical items that will enhance the seniors lives the bonds that we form will be important and memorable to the seniors and the students.

Chesed Shel Emet, חסד של אמת



The mitzvah of Chesed Shel Emet, חסד של אמת, is introduced in 6th grade and taught in greater detail in 7th and 8th grades. Students learn the laws related to death and dying from the moment of death through aninut (the period from death until burial), the burial, shiva, shloshim and the year of mourning. A visit to the local funeral home along with a member of the Chevra

Kadisha is a unique learning opportunity. Visits to a local cemetery to clean tombstones are incredibly meaningful to the students. Each student has their own unique relationship with their individual concept of death, and together in small groups they support each other through this providing opportunity for both emotional and spiritual growth.

For my last mitzvah trip I would like to go to the cemetery to clean gravestones. This has been the most powerful mitzvah trip for me throughout all three years doing mitzvah trips so I would like to be able to go one last time together. I have yet to find my family in the cemetery, which I have just recently been told has been buried there, so I would really like to go and clean their gravestones.

Jamie B., 8th grade

Tzar Ba'alei Chaim, צער בעלי חיים, The Ethical Treatment of Animals

Lessons on the mitzvah Tzar Ba'alei Chaim, צער בעלי חיים, The Ethical Treatment of Animals, focus on our responsibility to animals. Discussions about the use of fur, kashrut and hunting precede volunteering at organizations like *Safe Animal Shelter*, *Greyhounds as Pets*, and [*Katz 4 Keeps: A Feline Rescue Facility*](#). We currently have teams of students providing socialization to kittens at *Katz 4 Keeps* twice a month.

Katz 4 Keeps is more than just a place. It's a state of mind. For those of you who don't know what Katz 4 Keeps is, Katz 4 Keeps is a place where people can come in to adopt kittens or cats that were strays before they were found on the street and brought there. Almost every Friday, I volunteer there with a few other eighth graders. They need volunteers there to socialize the cats so that later on, they can interact with humans and be adopted. I love playing with all of the kittens and cats there. Katz 4 Keeps helps me observe a very important mitzvah called Tza'ar Ba'alei Hayim.

In the very first chapters of the Torah, animals are created on the fifth day of creation

and establish an important connection with humans. Even when Noah is told to build an ark so God can destroy the world, God takes kindness on animals and lets Noah take a few animals from each species on the ark with him so they can repopulate the earth. Throughout the Torah, animals have a special connection with humans. The mitzvah Tza'ar Ba'alei



Hayim tells people to not treat animals cruelly. I think that cats on the street without a home are suffering, maybe even starving. That is why I love going to Katz 4 Keeps every week and find it meaningful. It is because I want to see every cat and kitten there find a home and be loved by someone. As you can see in the picture below, my mom and I are holding a kitten. There is a story behind that picture.

My mom drove us to Katz 4 Keeps one day and started socializing the cats. I somehow convinced her to get a kitten. So a few weeks later, on a Sunday, just my mom and I drove back to Katz 4 Keeps and started looking for a kitten to adopt. She said the choice was mine. It took me hours to decide on a kitten, but I finally decided on a cute tuxedo kitten that was very friendly. We took a picture with the kitten before we left to always remember that moment. Now, I have an even deeper connection with Katz 4 Keeps and will keep going there because I love what I do there. That is why Katz 4 Keeps is more than just a place.

Elior L., 8th grade

Students research the hygiene products they use to find out the company's policies on animal research and the use of animal by-products. They then create infographics to illustrate the information they have collected.

Integration with the language arts and science program is important to the study of this mitzvah. In science class the impact this mitzvah has on biology and dissection is an important discussion. Is permissible for an animal to be killed for the purpose of being dissected as part of a Middle School science class? Students discuss this and even debate the issue with students in other Jewish Day Schools on the classroom blog.

In language arts students choose a picture book that deals with the ethical treatment of animal. After reading the book they write a review of the book and its effectiveness in teaching this mitzvah.

Hey, Little Ant as an example of צער בעלי חיים

In Mitzvot class we are learning about צער בעלי חיים - the ethical treatment of animals. We read the book *Hey, Little Ant* by Phillip and Hannah Hoose. The book is about a boy who wants to crush an ant. The boy says why he should crush the ant, and the ant comes back saying that he has the same life as humans.

This book relates to the verse “פֹּתַח אֶת יָדְךָ וּמַשְׁבִּיעַ לְכָל חַי רִצּוֹן” (Open your hands and treat all living things with kindness,)” because the boy has a chance to protect the ant. The book ends by saying “Should the ant get squished? Should the ant go free? It’s up to the kid, not up to me. We’ll leave the kid with the raised-up shoe. What do you think that kid should do?” I think the kid should move his foot away. We learn to treat animals with the same respect we want to be treated from צער בעלי חיים - The ethical treatment of animals. This is a great book to teach kids what צער בעלי חיים.

Allie B., 7th grade

Jewish Attitudes Towards the Disabled

לא-תקלל חרש--ולפני עִוֵּר, לא
תִּתֵּן מְכַשָּׁל

Students learn Jewish attitudes towards people with disabilities. They tour the synagogue in which our school is housed to see what accommodations have been made to provide a more meaningful experience for disabled members of our community. Students study Jewish texts and discuss the impact of various disabilities on Jewish and secular life. As part of our commitment to connect the mitzvot with the larger community, we then volunteer at the [Mt. Herman Exceptional Student Center](#). After touring the school and learning about the very special needs of these students, all of whom are all profoundly physically and mentally impaired, our middle school students are each assigned a class to work with for the duration of the school year. It is a project that never fails to have a lasting impact on our students. In the words of one of our students:

This year, the 7th grade has been working at a school for mentally and physically disabled children, Mt. Herman. We go to the school to help the kids learn and we make them feel comfortable. We help the teachers by walking the students, in their wheelchairs, around the school among other helpful activities. For me, the enjoyment of this mitzvah is that we get to bond with the students. I help the preschool class made up of six, seven, and eight year olds. I get to hold the kids when they cry, walk them to the playground, and bond with the kids, which is the best part for me. The mitzvah we do is Gemilut Hesed, **the act of kindness**.

On Friday, we were invited to join the school at a Spring Carnival. We got to walk the kids around the outside carnival and take them to all of the activities. There was music, food, a small bounce house for the kids who can walk, face painting, and many more small activities. Each of us took one student and walked them around to each activity. I personally really enjoyed helping the kids have fun because I know they deserve it. My favorite part was helping Taveon, the student I always work with, play on the bounce house. Even though he can't walk, I held him and helped him bounce by holding his arms.

In my opinion, I loved helping the students at Mt. Herman. It has made a big impact on me, as well. Every time I went there, I always helped this one little boy, Taveon. The first time I went there I bonded with Taveon right off the bat. He is a seven year old boy who has a lot of pressure on his lungs and it is very hard for him to achieve things. I don't know much about his disability, but I do know that he will be having a big surgery coming up soon in his life, and I want to be there to support him. Every time I walked into the classroom, the teachers always knew who I was going to help. I really appreciate the teachers helping me learn how to help take care of a child with disabilities. They were really helpful and appreciative on the work I did with their students. I really hope to go back to Mt. Herman on my own time and help the kids there. Hopefully, for my 8th grade mitzvah project, I can go to Mt. Herman.

Emily T., 7th grade

Integration with the language arts class is important to the study of people with disabilities. Students hear the novel *Stuck in Neutral* by Terry Trueman, telling the story of a child born with a severe case of cerebral palsy. Reading this novel prepares the students for their work at Mt. Herman. It also allows for creative writing as the novel's ending is open and allows students the opportunity to write their own final chapter.

Mazon - Feeding the Hungry

Kids love food! They understand how important it is because they love to eat. We study the verse :

וְאָכַלְתָּ, וְשָׂבַעְתָּ--וַיְבָרַכְתָּ אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ (דברים ח:י)

“You should eat and be satisfied and bless the Lord your God.”



Our study leads to the understanding that God intended for us to enjoy the food provided for us. We are obligated to see to it that those in need also have food to eat. In addition to our work at Food Rescue Agencies we create “Care and Comfort” bags. Filled with an assortment of non-perishable and easy-to-eat foods, these bags can easily be handed to someone who is standing by the side of the road asking for food. Creating these bags incorporates important math skills and lessons about basic nutrition. Students are given a budget, taken to the store and then challenged to choose the food products to be included in the “Care and Comfort” bags. Students must calculate the cost of the items they are choosing and weigh the relative health value to determine what they will buy. After carefully selecting the items to go in the bags and packing them, students keep “Care and Comfort” bags in their parents’ cars in order to have them available when they see someone in need.

My experience with giving the comfort bag to a homeless person made me thankful for what I have. I gave my bag to a man, and he was very nice. I decided to give my bag to him because he looked like he needed help. The man said “God bless you”, and that made me feel very good about myself.

Rebecca B., 8th grade

Serving breakfast at a local homeless shelter really brings home the message of hunger in our society. Likewise, volunteering at a food bank and delivering Thanksgiving food baskets to local families teaches our students they can not judge others, they can simply serve as God’s partner here on earth as they share their

good fortune with others who are in need. Families in the school donate food and the students purchase additional food and turkeys, again using their math skills to be sure that they are getting the most value for their money while staying in their budget. They then pack the food bags and then deliver them to families referred to us by a local public school. Special bags of kosher groceries and a kosher turkey are provided for Jewish families in need. Twenty-two years ago we provided a Thanksgiving dinner to *one family*. This project has grown each year. In recent years we have delivered at least 50 turkeys, over 100 bags of groceries and gift cards to families temporarily displaced and living in extended-stay hotels. Over the years, our deliveries have easily totaled *thousands* of turkeys and grocery bags.

In preparation for Thanksgiving, our middle school delivered turkeys and groceries to families in need. We took these deliveries all over Jacksonville and saw a variety of people. Some of the people we delivered to lived in apartments and some lived in houses. Some had children and some didn't. Some had multiple people living with them and some lived alone. The one thing they all had in common was that they were in need. If we hadn't given turkeys and groceries to these families, they would not have been able to celebrate Thanksgiving this year.

On Thanksgiving, it is a tradition to eat turkey and have a feast. The meal can be really expensive and a lot of people are not able to afford it. When we delivered turkeys and groceries to underprivileged people, they were really grateful because they would not have otherwise been able to celebrate Thanksgiving. As a Jewish school, it is important to help people in need because God commands us to. I had never truly thought about the fact that many people are not able to afford Thanksgiving and had always taken the feast for granted. This year, I deeply appreciated being able to have a big meal to celebrate Thanksgiving, but I also felt embarrassed to have so much food while others have none. This year I gave thanks for all of the little things that I have always taken for granted.

Sabrina M., 8th grade

Happy Thanksgiving



Last Friday we packed Thanksgiving bags for people who are less fortunate than us. Today we delivered the bags with a turkey to the families. After we gave the food to the family I felt like I did something good. I'm thankful for being able to feed families that might not have been able to eat if it wasn't for us. "אל תפרוש מן" = Do not separate yourself from the community. The Thanksgiving project that we did is an example of this mitzvah because we gave food to people in the

community. Most of the people that we gave food to, we didn't know. It's important to give to people in the community that we don't know because it makes you get to know the community. By doing this mitzvah project it puts you into perspective, of what many people go through all the time.

Allie B., 8th grade

Projects on the Road



Our 8th grade students travel to New York City every year for a graduation trip. It is important that they understand that the outreach they offer at home continues while they are away. As such, a community service project is part of the trip every year. Students have volunteered with seniors at a retirement community, shopped and delivered food to needy

families in Brooklyn, and delivered food to the homeless on the streets of Manhattan. We currently volunteer at [*Bobbie's Place*](#) every year. *Bobbie's Place* is a G'mach which collects new children's clothing. Students sort and tag clothing so that it is ready for distribution.

“...there was a **gemach** to help kids in need receive clothing. We volunteered at this gemach which is called Bobbie’s Place. We put color-coded tags on shirts. Even though we did not directly give people the clothes, we still participated in the mitzvah of “clothing the naked”.

Lily H., 8th grade

Conclusion

Middle school students at the Martin J. Gottlieb Day School study Jewish law, customs, traditions and values. Their studies become meaningful by directly applying those laws, customs, traditions and values to their own lives as well as to the larger community. Each student is treated as an individual in the program and particular attention is paid to their associated academic, social, and emotional growth as part of the mitzvah program. Just as each of our students is unique, they are individually assessed on their abilities. Each grade may have different criteria for assessment, but as we support students of all academic and emotional abilities we ensure everyone has an opportunity to succeed in their own way.

We are individually integrating language arts, math, art, science and technology into the fabric of our students’ Jewish lives in ways that can not be replicated in any other way. Through this program students form a deeper understanding of self as well as their Jewish identities. Students learn that *mitzvot* are not simply “good deeds” -- but that they are commandments from God. While students may enjoy some of the projects, the goal is to teach them that they have the power to make a meaningful impact on their world while putting Jewish law into practice. If, at the end of their three years in the middle school, students graduate with a commitment to continue their involvement in the world around them while growing Jewishly, we will have accomplished this goal. To this end, we have seen that a large number of our graduates continue to serve in [*Youth Leadership Jacksonville*](#), a program aiming to develop community leadership skills in high school. In addition, our graduates participate in [*American Jewish World Services*](#), [*The Peace Corps*](#), and [*Teach America*](#). As high school graduates, students

have created their own organizations to allow them to continue their participation in Jewish life while attending secular schools. One student formed *ARK - Acts of Random Kindness* at his high school. Another started a Jewish student union at hers. Many have also assumed leadership positions in Jewish organizations and communities. The youth director at the Jacksonville Jewish Center, the synagogue we are housed in, is actually a graduate of this program.

My participation in The Mitzvah Program showed me, at a formative age, multiple ways I could make an impact in my local community. I've carried the memories of those weekly mitzvah trips throughout my adult life, and to this day, I regularly volunteer and find ways to give back to local, national, and international causes. The Galinsky Academy/Martin J. Gottlieb Day School provided me with a high-quality education inside the classroom, and The Mitzvah Program supplemented that curriculum by teaching me how to be a person engaged with the larger world.

*Dana Kresel, Assistant Director
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As students work on projects under different and at times challenging circumstances they develop self confidence. They see what they are able to accomplish and feel pride in their ability. By 8th grade students are able to guide and direct implementation of the projects. For example, 8th grade students direct the younger students in the sorting and packing of the Thanksgiving food baskets. They set the example by being the first in each group to greet strangers when delivering Rosh Hashana honey cakes for the first time. Similarly they work with the 6th and 7th graders at the cemetery clean-up encouraging them before the project begins and working with them at the cemetery. Leadership skills develop in a natural way as the students work together. Students who do not always feel capable or accomplished in the classroom often assume a leadership role when working on a mitzvah project. Likewise, students who have difficulties expressing themselves in the classroom discover they can easily communicate with a disabled child or gain a boost of self confidence when working with a senior citizen or participating in a planting project for Tu B'Shvat.

Required journaling after each project provides students with the opportunity to reflect on the work they have done. (All student quotes included here are from student-owned [blogs](#).)

In school, we are learning about the phrase, “Let all who are hungry come and eat. Let all who are in need come and make Pesach,” in honor of the upcoming holiday, Passover. It is about feeding the hungry and helping out in the community. At school, we observe this by doing community service [mitzvah] projects every Friday afternoon. It is an important part of our curriculum because we learn about what happens in real life, not just stuff in the textbook. It helps improve my understanding of what is going on and how much our neighbors are suffering. It has changed my view on the world also that I realize it’s not just the perfect bubble that we live in. We experience this through things like delivering food to families who don’t have and visiting the elderly. It has changed my perspective on the world to be more realistic and helps me appreciate what I have.

Zoe M., 8th grade

Words may not adequately portray this program, so please take a few minutes and watch this video of an inside view of the mitzvah program at the [Martin J. Gottlieb Day School](#).