

Authentic Service Learning Through the Mitzvah Program at the Martin J. Gottlieb Day School



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 הנה אומר, לא עליך המלאכה לגמר, ולא אתה בן חורין לבטל ממנה”

The *mitzvah program* at the [Martin J. Gottlieb Day School](#) was first introduced as an integral part of the middle school curriculum 22 years ago. 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 students who became part of their community at large with service projects would grow to understand both their responsibility to the community and their ability to make a difference even at the young age of 11. Understanding the social, cultural and economic issues facing communities around the world helps students understand the need for their service and participation in community service projects. With these ideas in mind the *mitzvah program* was launched. In the ensuing years it has grown along with the number of organizations both locally and nationally that 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. Two and a half hours a week 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. Eighth grade students are asked to select one project to dedicate themselves to provide them the opportunity for immersion in a project in order to better realize the impact their actions have. The 8th grade students also participate in all holiday-related projects. While it would be impossible to detail all of the projects we have done and agencies we have partnered with 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, לא-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. We then discuss 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. Sixth grade students currently volunteer at [Feeding Northeast Florida](#) one Friday every month.

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 the 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 throwing food away.

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), כְּבֹד אֶת-אָבִיךָ, וְאֶת-אִמְךָ our students learn the importance of respect for 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. 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

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 grade. 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.



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.



place.

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

Elior L., 8th grade

Jewish Attitudes Towards the Disabled

Do not put a stumbling block before the blind, לא-תקלל חרש--ולפני עִוֵּר, לא
תִּתֵּן מְכַשֵּׁל

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, who 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

Mazon - Feeding the Hungry

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

וְאָכַלְתָּ, וְשָׂבַעְתָּ--וּבֵרַכְתָּ 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. 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, the students purchase additional food and turkeys, 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.

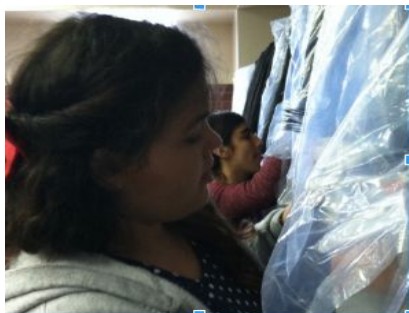
In preparation for Thanksgiving, our middle school delivered turkeys and groceries to families in need. We took these deliveries all over Jacksonville and saw a variety of people. Some of the people we delivered to lived in apartments and some lived in houses. Some had children and some didn't. Some 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

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

Students in the Middle School at the Martin J. Gottlieb Day School study Jewish law, customs, traditions and values. Their studies become meaningful by directly applying the learned laws, customs traditions and values to their own lives as well as the larger community. Students thus 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 can 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.

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](#).) To this end we have seen that a large number of our graduates continue on to serve in [Youth Leadership Jacksonville](#), a program aiming to develop community leadership skills, in high school. Graduates have gone on to participate in [American Jewish World Services](#), [The Peace Corps](#), and [Teach America](#). Many have also assumed leadership positions in Jewish organizations and communities.

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](#).