

Maimonides' major milestone School marks 75 years of turning students into adult 'mensches'

By Alexandra Lapkin

Advocate Staff

The hallways of Maimonides Upper School, which houses grades 9 through 12, look like those of any high school, except for one detail. The lockers are flung wide open, revealing labeled stacks of binders and textbooks topped with sweatshirts and jackets.

That small detail reveals the close-knit community atmosphere of the school – the students do not feel the need to lock up their personal belongings.

"There's an intimate feeling in our school. Everyone knows your name," said Nathan Katz, Head of School and himself a Maimonides alum.

During the 2012-13 academic year, Maimonides School is celebrating its 75th anniversary. Founded in 1937 by Rabbi Dr. Joseph Soloveitchik, the school grew from its first six students – taught by one teacher in an upstairs room of a Roxbury synagogue – to a state-of-the-art campus at 34 Philbrick Road and 2 Clark Road in Brookline. The school encompasses kindergarten through 12th grade, divided among its elementary, middle and upper schools.

Katz walks through the hallways, opens a door to one of the classrooms and stealthily steps inside to listen in on the lesson in progress. It is a 1st-grade classroom, and the children are sitting on the floor, facing their teacher. Letters of the Hebrew alphabet are on the wall above her, as she reads aloud from a book, switching effortlessly between English and Hebrew. The kids repeat her pronunciation of the Hebrew word for "flag," and study its Hebrew spelling.

In a high school-level Judaic studies class, students are discussing Shakespeare's "Macbeth," theories on the psychology of evil, and their connection to the Pharaoh's treatment of the Jewish people in ancient Egypt. They are engaged in a lively discussion, answering their teacher's questions, listening to each other's ideas – all in Hebrew.

The largest Jewish high school in New England and the only modern Orthodox day school in Greater Boston, Maimonides has been a staple of the Jewish community for decades. It is not unusual for families to move to Boston from different states in order to enroll their children in the school.

Yet that was not always the case. At the time Maimonides was founded, the Jewish community was engaged in active assimilation, according to Katz.

"The Rav [the late Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, who died in 1993] insisted that modernity could and even should be synergistically coupled with Orthodoxy," he said.

Despite designing education based on the traditions of Jewish Orthodoxy, Soloveitchik was an innovator for his time. When both private and public schools limited opportunities for girls, he believed in providing equal education, with boys and girls learning together.

"When you see our girls excelling in



Maimonides School 5th-graders build a model of the Warsaw Ghetto using Legos. Participating in the project are (front) Eytan Pomper and (from left) Gabe Grossman, Liran Taieb and Natan Levin.

classrooms or in Mock Trial courtrooms, or on the basketball court, it's hard to imagine that anyone ever thought their opportunities should be limited," Katz said. This past February, Michal Alge, a junior, became the first female basketball player at the school to score 1,000 career points.

Maimonides offers a dual curriculum that combines Limudei Kodesh (Judaic studies) with general education courses. Beginning with kindergarten, learning is based on a program that integrates math puzzles, reading fundamentals, art, and physical education with learning Hebrew songs, dances, and about Jewish holidays. That way, students are exposed to a broad-spectrum education from a very young age.

"Our dual curriculum education prepares our students for the gap-year Israeli seminaries and the U.S. colleges of their choice, and our graduates are ... prepared to take their places in both the Jewish and general communities," said Katz.

At Maimonides' elementary school, teachers work in teams to plan and implement lessons, and they each take a lead on a specific area of the curriculum. Students gather as a whole grade, in smaller groups, or in one-on-one instruction, depending on the format of the lesson. That flexibility allows teachers to address a wide range of learning styles, and for students to have more opportunities to socialize with their peers.

In addition to the core curriculum, students may also choose to take chugim (electives), from a selection that includes foreign languages, the school newspaper,

dance, and more. By the time they are in middle school, the range of weekly electives grows to include more choices, such as architecture and intramural sports.

In 6th grade, students participate in BRAVE, an anti-bullying initiative developed by Yeshiva University, as part of the comprehensive social-skills curriculum. An emphasis on social skills and developing middot tovot (good qualities) starts in kindergarten and is designed to fit every age group.

In middle school, teachers begin to track their students' performance and guide them toward classes that best fit them. In the upper school, the levels range from core, to honors, to advanced placement (AP) courses.

Students' minimum high school requirements include four years of courses in Talmud, Bible, and "Issues in Jewish Thought and Practice," in addition to English, math, science and history. Similar to a secular school system, the upper school offers honors and AP classes in U.S. history, English literature, calculus, biology and chemistry, for students looking to challenge themselves.

When classes end at 5:30 p.m., most students at the upper school stay for sports practice and extracurricular activities that range from Mock Trial, to jazz band, to volunteering at a soup kitchen, to working on a literary magazine.

One of the tenets of a Maimonides education, in addition to instilling a love of learning and chesed (treating others with kindness), is support of Israel through its B'nei Akiva shlichot (Youth Zionism) program. Currently, nearly 260 alumni are citizens of the Holy Land.

Every year, between 80 and 90 percent of recent graduates defer college matriculation to spend a year studying in Israel and 14 percent are now on active duty in the Israel Defense Forces.

Many alumni who have made aliyah to Israel have made an impact there. Meira Weinstein, who graduated in 1999, is the Director of the Lone Soldiers program in Jerusalem. Batya Leidner-Ehrlich, from the class of 1978, is the Director of Housing Services at the Israel Ministry of Health.

Alumni who live in the United States also continue their deep involvement with the Jewish community well after graduation. Steven Bayme, from the class of 1967, became the National Director at the Contemporary Jewish Life Department of American Jewish Committee; Rabbi Asher Lopatin, who graduated in 1982, is Rosh Yeshiva-elect at Yeshivat Chovavei Torah in New York.

There are many notable alumni who contribute to government, academia, business and the arts. Etan Cohen, a 1992 graduate, is a screenwriter in Hollywood, while Matthew Levitt, who graduated in 1988, is the Director of the Counterterrorism and Intelligence Program at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

All parents want their children to succeed but Maimonides parents want something more. "If you ask our parents what they want their children to become, most of them answer, 'mensches,'" Katz noted.

A halachic way of life is taught to inspire students with enthusiasm for social justice and compassion for others, not only as a value, but a call to action. "With character development so central to our mission, our entire [elementary school] has been engaged in a Hakarat Hatov project," Katz said. "[The students learned] the value of being grateful for all the good in their lives, and showing appreciation to all the people who are kind and helpful to them – adults and children alike."

According to Katz, the school's recently launched tuition-discount program, Maimonides Affordability Initiative (MAI) Tuition for students in kindergarten through 2nd grade, will work to ensure that parents can continue to send their children to Maimonides in the 2013-14 school year. In addition, parents have the option of applying for a Discover Day School grant through Combined Jewish Philanthropies (CJP). Katz said more than half of the students at Maimonides receive tuition assistance from the \$4.5 million in financial aid distributed every year.

There may be iPads in the classrooms and teachers using the latest methods in child development and pedagogy, but Katz said the philosophy of Maimonides still reflects Rabbi Soloveitchik's vision 75 years ago: "Inspiring our students to ... respect their fellow men, to love their fellow Jews, to support the State of Israel, to fully engage in their Jewish and general communities, [so] they can bend the arc of heaven down to earth."

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