

All our young people, overachievers or not, deserve our praise

THE RABBI'S TURN RABBI ARTHUR GREEN

The season of graduations is upon us once again. From one end of our community to the other, parents and grandparents are filled with pride and *nachas* as they see young people complete a course of study and go forth to conquer new worlds, yet further sources of pride to their families and communities.

Our local newspapers are filled with pictures of smiling young people in mortarboards: valedictorians, Phi Beta Kappa members, medical school graduates, scholarship winners and countless other forms of junior Jewish overachievers.

Please do not misunderstand. I wish our excellent young people only the best; I, too, swell in pride at their accomplishments. As a community, we can well be proud of our collective academic achievement. But all this attention lavished on those straight-A students and their awards is also a statement of values in our community.

We should prize academic achievement, and indeed we do. But what about our other values? Where is the young person who excels in those areas instead of academics to find his or her deserved reward? When is the *kindest* kid in the senior class called up on stage? Or the most *generous*? Where is the newspaper article about the young person who is most devoted to family? The one who sacrifices a few A's because of the needs of a sick grandparent? Or the one who has to go to work after school to help support the family?

We program our children at a very early age to strive for success. Do we program them as carefully to do so honestly, to make sure they don't step on anyone else's toes as they climb to the top? Teachers and school officials know well that Jewish parents press for constant educational enrichment, for advanced placement classes and college board tutorial programs.

We are terribly concerned about scores: I.Q.s, college boards, law boards, GREs and everything in between. We could stand to put a little more of that same effort into aspects of the educational program that can't be so easily quantified: learning to share, to care for others and especially to respect and support those around us who are not and never will be in the ranks of the academic overachievers.

The simple fact is that not everyone can get A's; the curve just doesn't work that way. I wonder if we ever think about how much pain we cause to the B or C student when we lavish all that attention and praise on the ones who come out on top again and again. How hard it is to be *average* in our community.

I think of the learning-disabled kid who never learned to read as well as others, or the math-phobic young person who could never grasp abstract number concepts. Or just the plain old average kid, the one who can't get into a first-rate college, the one who just will never be "my son, the doctor" or "my granddaughter, the rabbi." What of them? Where are these kids celebrated among us Jews?

An old Jewish proverb says "educate the child according to his (or her) own way." Not all our kids can fit into the same mold. There's good to be found in each of them, and we do best in an educational system that helps all children develop their own strong points. The artistic, musical or athletic child also deserves a break.

We all know it's happened more than once that a child who receives sufficient praise for achievement in one area eventually picks up in others as a result of that encouragement. We also all know more than one example of the academic "late bloomer." For kids like this, our patience and willingness to work with them *where they are* is terribly important.

Some of these young people, unable to receive from parents and community the support and reinforcement they so much need and deserve, find it elsewhere. It is just this sort of Jewish kid who is ready prey for missionaries and cult leaders.

What such people have to offer, at least on the surface, is unqualified love and acceptance. "I care about you and love you just as you are" is the unspoken opening line of any successful missionary — or outreach worker, for that matter. Would that such a simple message could be heard more often

See **RABBI'S** page 31

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RABBI'S

from page 27

among us Jews.

Let's hear a little more of: "My son, the cab driver — he's a wonderful, caring and *successful* human being!" Success belongs not only to those who come out on top of the heap, as measured by money, status or advanced degrees. Success has a lot more to do with contentment, with knowing who you are, what you care about, and where you are going.

As our rabbis said a long time ago: "Who is rich? The one who is happy with his lot."

So here's to the graduates, *all* of them. And here's to those who didn't graduate this June, to those on extended leaves of absence, busy figuring who they are before they go back to school. And here's to our college dropouts, those who decided that work experience rather than books will be the best teacher for this point in life.

We salute you, you with the A's and you with the C's. Have a great vacation, all of you. You *deserve* it! ■