

Rabbi Darren Levine 0:00
Nice to be with you this morning.

Rabbi Darren Levine 0:03
Thank you, Alan for inviting me.

Alan 0:06
Thank you for being here. We'll we'll just wait another minute just we'll just see who else shows up. I, I know there was a few other people who asked for the code to get into the meeting. So I don't see those people yet. So we will wait another minute for them to join us. All right, it's 847 I think we should begin and if other people hop on, we'll certainly invite them to join us as well. Booker Tov, everyone, good morning. So it's nice to see everyone virtually this morning. Already saw many of your children already at are on the morning news program. So it's always good to start our day together as a community. I, in a moment, I would want to introduce our speaker for this morning, Rabbi Darren Levine. Before I do that, I just want to say a couple of words about this morning and what we're doing.

Alan 1:47
Thank you, I'm going to have to pop back and forth from my notes to invite some people in so it's a little bit spotty, you'll forgive me. I just want to say a couple words about positive education. And how Jewish Academy of Orlando came to this because we have some families who are non Jewish Academy families that have requested to be part of this meeting. So we, we, we marketed this meeting beyond our Jewish Academy families. So back in the summer of 2018, I first learned about positive psychology and positive education from one of our parents who is on our our meeting this morning, Ilana Ivan.

Alan 2:37
So I want to begin by thanking Ilana for bringing positive psychology and positive education to our school. When Ilana presented positive psychology positive education to me, I drank the Kool Aid right away, I realized that this is the - This is the missing link, something that I've been looking for for a long time in terms of transforming our schools transform the lives of our families and our students. So we spent last year the school year of 2018 - 2019, preparing our teachers and preparing our staff for for this coming school year, we introduced positive education into our school language and program throughout the year.

Alan 3:26
As we as you know, for those of you who are parents in our school, we have a middah of the week, our character strength of the week, and our teachers have been doing exercises and we've been talking about positive education and our different character strengths, and we do it throughout the week, whether it's at Monday morning minyan or our Kabbalat Shabbat program and different activities and, and things that we're doing throughout the week. So I truly believe that a we've only touched the surface in terms of what positive education and positive

psychology can do to transform our school and transform the lives of our students and our and their families. I'm excited to continue to grow this movement in our school in our community.

Alan 4:10

And only recently did I find out that in addition, I thought that I was sort of like a lone wolf in this and from the Jewish perspective, and only recently did I find out that there's a whole Jewish movement of positive Judaism. And I immediately contacted Rabbi Levine, who is now here with us to share with us some of his thoughts and ideas and also about raising your child to be a mesch which is course, if you know me a little bit, you know, that's the number one goal for me as Head of School at Jewish Academy of Orlando. So it is now my honor and privilege to introduce Rabbi Levine I wanted to say a few words about him. Rabbi Levine is the founding Rabbi of Tamid, the downtown synagogue in New York established in 2011. He cares deeply about building community moral education and creative Jewish expression and is the founder of Positive Judaism, a new vision for Jewish life in the 21st century. He holds rabbinic ordination from HUC JIR, and has a doctorate in pastoral psychology from the Postgraduate Center for Mental Health. Rabbi Levine has served the community project in lower Manhattan and Temple Sha'are Tefila in New York City. He's done international relief work in Israel and Africa served the high holiday pulpit in South Africa, worked for over 10 years at Jewish camps for the reform movement and served as a chaplain in the US Army. Rabbi Levine hosts a regular podcast and his book positive Judaism, a rabbi's guide to well-being and happiness is available wherever books are sold.

Alan 5:44

Most recently, Rabbi Levine along with ABC reporter Lauren Glasberg, led an ABC 7 online Passover Seder for New Yorkers. I guess if it was online that it could have been for us too, had we known about it. Rabbi Levine's academic and pastoral interests rests at the intersection of psychology and religion and moral education with a pastoral and academic expertise in childhood grief. He regularly counsels children who have experienced the recent loss of a parent or close loved one. Rabbi Levine is a member of the central conference of American rabbis and is the author of numerous books and articles. He's also a native of California and a graduate of UC Santa Cruz, where my daughter went to school, so go slugs, what are they called the slugs, they're the the yellow things, I can't think of it. Anyways. And so, without further ado, it is my honor and privilege to welcome Rabbi Darren Levine to our community. And I'm going to ask you before we begin to please mute your mics and we'll have some time for some interaction questions at the end. I also have my my gardener here. So I'm going to mute my mic. And so hopefully you won't hear the background noise anymore.

Rabbi Darren Levine 7:12

Thank you, Alan. And good morning, everybody. I know that these are

Alan 7:16

slugs banana slugs, I'm sorry, banana slugs.

Rabbi Darren Levine 7:20

Proud banana slugs. Well, thank you, Alan, for that warm introduction. And good morning, everybody. I am speaking to you today from a very small farmhouse about 100 miles north of New York City in a county called Litchfield, Connecticut. And we came up here about seven or eight weeks ago with our family to lay low from the Coronavirus. I'm sure all of you've been following the news. You know that New York City is a real hotbed right now. But the thing that we're learning about Coronavirus is that, you know, no one is immune from getting ill and at the same time, like your school community, there are wonderful opportunities to entrench in community and to use this time for planning for the future. And I know that all families are kind of thinking about that even though this is kind of a disruptive time for our lives. And for any of you who are ill or know people who have passed because of COVID-19, my heart goes out to you. And if anyone in your networks are ill, I hope that they have speedy recoveries.

Rabbi Darren Levine 8:19

So Alan was telling me a little bit about the work that you're doing at your school community, in positive education. And that really is on the cutting edge of what is going on, not only in, in the world of education, but clearly what you tapped into, in Orlando is, is something that is on the cutting edge, and he asked me to talk a little bit about how Positive Judaism evolved, which I'll do in a minute. And then he wanted me to speak about the topic of the day, which is on every parent's mind, which is how to raise a mensch in the 21st century. And like all of you, I'm also a parent, I have two sons, one is 15 and the other is 12. And I am constantly thinking about you know how to develop these two human beings and in both the direction that I'm witnessing them evolve naturally and organically into but also trying to shape their, their path in life. And I'm also very closely connected with our Hebrew school community and we have about 160 kids K-18 in our school and, you know, watching them develop and, and working through their lives is something that I'm intimately involved with. So, you know, raising children, and developing young human beings is at the top of my mind pretty much every day like all of you.

Rabbi Darren Levine 9:37

And positive education and Jewish positive education is something that I think is is brand new and whatever you're exploring and doing down in Orlando, I hope that you figure out a way to share it with the broader Jewish community. And then after I present for a few minutes this morning, maybe 15 or 20, I asked Alan, if it was okay if we could open up the conversation to discussion and questions that you might be thinking about not only in your school community, but in your families. Some of the real honest pressures that you're facing, as a parent dealing with your kids, thinking about their areas of strength or their areas of development, thinking about how to schedule their days in these disruptive times, figuring out things, how to say to them to positively encourage them to reduce their screen time, to invest more time in their personal interests, and hobbies more so than just their digital devices. And these are all very complicated things. So we're going to tap into those in over the next 20 minutes or so.

Rabbi Darren Levine 10:35

And then I really hope that we can have an honest conversation about some of the pressures that you're feeling as parents and ways that positive education or in this case, positive Jewish parenting can support you. So I hope that these are new ideas, and they're fresh ideas and that maybe they will, you know, inspire you to think more broadly about what it means to be a parent and bring Jewish ideas to your parenting. So for those of you who, you know, are aware of this word, it's about raising a mensch. And, you know, there are a lot of different ways to describe or define what a mensch is but primarily, it's about it's a Yiddish word that's talks about a very polite, smart and thoughtful child. And you know, that's a mensch. And I don't want any parent who doesn't want their child to be a mensch. But the sad thing in the truth is, is that not every child is a mensch.

Rabbi Darren Levine 11:33

And our question is, well, how do you raise a mensch over the lifetime that you have a child living in your home? Well, it certainly takes more than faith and hope, and good luck to have a loving child. And so we'll talk about some ideas and I hope that after we're done talking about them, you'll understand a new concept called strengths based parenting. That's my great hope for this call is that when we're done, you really have an understanding about this idea called strengths based parenting, how to parent your child from a place of their strengths. And we'll get into that a little bit.

Rabbi Darren Levine 12:15

Before we get into that, I want to tell you a little story about how positive Judaism in my own experience emerged. And it really, I'm so glad that Alan, he said that I was from California, because I think the Californians and Floridians have a lot in common. You're both raised in sunshine states. We have access to the outdoors, it's often very bright and sunny. It's generally a culture that is based in the outdoors and we have access to things that people year round in the northeast or the Midwest where the weather's a little more challenging - we generally have the orientation toward sunny spirits and so that is something that I realized growing up as a child in California when I got to New York, well New Yorkers is very different life experience and even New Yorkers, and many of you know, New Yorkers, or perhaps you are New Yorkers. There's a little bit more of a harsh edge. And 20 years ago, when I came to New York, and began seminary, it was a real culture shock to me to step into a universe where people were much busier, they were more stressed out or anxious. And that was inconsistent with my upbringing in Southern California. And that was a very important realization that I had in that kind of culture clash.

Rabbi Darren Levine 13:42

And what emerged was about a 20 year experience of trying to understand Jewish life in these two comparisons, and 2015 I happened to have been in a terrible car accident and when I began to heal from that car accident, one day, I was kind of hobbling past my bookshelf and I noticed a book that I kind of had had glanced through, perused once before, but this time it really jumped out and was called Authentic Happiness: A new psychology and the evolution for positive, thriving. It is written by a man named Marty Seligman. I thought to myself, I was in a

car accident, you know, young parent, kids at home, a young congregation, that is what I need. I need authentic happiness. So I read that book cover to cover. And the ideas in that book spoke to me so deeply, not only as someone who grew up in California and had a kind of sunny perspective on the world, but was now you're facing a whole kind of reworking and retooling of my spirit and my mind. But I was certain that I needed authentic happiness, I read that book cover to cover. And the ideas not only spoke to me as someone who's recovering from an accident, but they spoke to me as a Jew. And I thought to myself, all of these ideas and these values and these strengths, these rest in a parallel way to what we know and what we have in Jewish values and in Jewish wisdom.

Rabbi Darren Levine 15:25

So a few months later, I was giving a sermon one Friday night and I was talking about my recovery in the accident and what I had learned in positive psychology, and what came out of my mouth without having it planned, I came up with the phrase "Positive Judaism" and it made so much sense to me. Later that evening at our Oneg Shabbat, a woman who was a guest at our shul that night, she came up to me and said, Rabbi, my name is Rose. I am a child of Holocaust survivors. I have been a psychotherapist in New York City for 45 years and Rabbi you are a young man. But I can tell you one thing. There is nothing positive about Judaism. And wow, I was so surprised to hear a wise eighty year old who lived life, who had witnessed life in her patients, was telling me that there was nothing positive about Judaism. And that just didn't add up for me.

Rabbi Darren Levine 16:30

And so I began to develop this idea of Positive Judaism. I call it a platform rather than a movement only because these ideas are not new. They're actually very old ideas, they are ideas that emerge from the ancient times of our people, they are within the DNA of our ritual practices, they are at the root of Jewish wisdom and what Positive Judaism has become, is more of a lens and a perspective in which we approach Jewish living. And that's how Positive Judaism in my experience began.

Rabbi Darren Levine 17:12

And we have created a Hebrew school platform that focuses on Jewish values from a positive, well-being place, really trying to help our children develop themselves in their best potential and understanding of self in a way that we hope that will motivate them to thrive in the world. So it's not like taking a positive pill, you can't just become positive. It requires a lot of dedicated thought, and really a new perspective and a new approach to thinking about what it means to be a Jew in the world. So that is a little bit about Positive Judaism. Over the course of our conversation this morning, as we get into the depths of the idea of being a mensch, I hope that you'll see how the intersection between positive psychology and the science of well-being and happiness intersects very organically with Jewish living and Jewish wisdom.

Rabbi Darren Levine 18:11

So let's jump into to this question of how to raise a mensch in the 21st century. So, Positive Judaism always tries to start with the research. And what I mean by research is what the academics are telling us about the human experience. And so here's what it says generally about raising happy children. So happy and well-adjusted children generally have positive influences in their lives that help them do better in school. It helps them have more energy, they sleep better, they're more relaxed and they have more friends. There are a lot of factors that go into raising this type of child. But you might be surprised to learn that it has less to do with the number of extracurricular activities that the children are involved in. It has less to do with the number of tutors they have, or their travel experiences or the size of their bedroom, or even the quality of their neighborhood.

Rabbi Darren Levine 19:26

Rather, a child's well being and their happiness has to do with the amount of love and attention they get from the primary parents and the primary adults in their lives. It has to do with their feelings of emotional security. And most importantly, and this gets back to what I was telling you about strengths-based parenting a few minutes ago. These children who are well and happy, they are very in touch with their strengths. And the adults in their lives are helping them become aware of their strengths, and helping them to focus on their strengths rather than on their weaknesses, which is a very common parenting mistake. So that's the research.

Rabbi Darren Levine 20:14

And here's what we know, and here's the how the research of positive psychology and Jewish living begin to intersect. I think you'll see it in this example. So over 2000 years ago, in the Babylonian Talmud, in the tractate called Kiddushin, there was a story that was described between a conversation of Jewish sages. So this is over 2000 years ago. And one of the things that the Jewish sages stated in this tractate was that a parent must teach their child to swim. Now, when I first learned about this, I thought this was terrific. And I think it's terrific for you and your families in Orlando because, by and large, our children know how to swim, pools and beaches, lakes, kids are outside and, and we as parents have taken the responsibility to teach our children how to swim.

Rabbi Darren Levine 21:09

But these rabbis of 2000 years ago believed that of all the lessons that a parent must teach their child, they must teach their child to swim. It's really quite brilliant. Because if you think about swimming, what's swimming all about? It's about keeping your head above the water. It's about learning how to be responsible for yourself and your body. And it's about learning how to survive on your own. Of course, the alternative is always needing to hold on to somebody else. If you don't know how to swim, then you're always holding on to a hand, the leg of somebody or the wall, and they're doing the hard work. And if you can't swim, you'll drown. So today's children need to swim. And every parent has to teach their children how to swim in the world.

Rabbi Darren Levine 22:08

But it's not just teaching our children how to survive in the pool. We have to teach our children how to thrive and to flourish. And this happens by helping to develop and identify what are called signature strengths. And if you can help your child identifying them, help them focus on their signature strengths. you'll teach them how to swim into a lifetime of well-being and happiness. And this is how you will raise your mensch, by focusing on their strengths.

Rabbi Darren Levine 22:43

So as a parent who's spent a lot of time and their kids in playgrounds, I want to share with you an anecdote about what I witnessed one playground morning at a playground in my neighborhood in lower Manhattan, in New York City. Well, as a parent I loved watching my kids play. I love watching negotiate with other kids and climb and swing and get dirty. And in their early years, I began to learn a lot about my parenting style by watching other parents attend to their kids. So there was this one woman I remember, a mother who was constantly praising her child about everything that her child did. And we'll call this child for now Becca. So this mom would always comment positively about what Becca was doing: 'Becca, your your rock pile Becca is amazing! Your slide down the slide, Becca was amazing! That jump Becca - amazing! Your hold on the monkey bars - amazing!'

Rabbi Darren Levine 23:51

Well, I really admired her enthusiasm and praise parenting does have positive value. But the problem is that Becca's mom was not teaching her how to swim. She was teaching Becca that seeking attention and positive praise for accomplishments is the way to be a child. So positive praise does have a place in parenting, but it doesn't help to support a child's independence, because praise parenting focuses mostly on a child's accomplishments rather than on their character strengths.

Rabbi Darren Levine 24:45

So here's another common mistake that parents make, a common mistake that parents make is focusing too much on their child's weaknesses and trying to correct their issues. So this is a common area focusing on weaknesses. Rather than bolstering their strength, they're focusing on their child's problems or what they interpret or think are their child's problems. So here's an example of how this might play out in a family's life. A parent might think, you know, my child is not strong in math. So we need to get him a tutor, because he needs to be able to perform well in math. Well, certainly children need to do their math. They need to learn math, because math is important. But does every child need to perform at an A level in math? And does this parenting mindset lead to happy and well-adjusted mensches? Or does it create anxiety and strife in the child's inner world? Because the child is learning from their parents that their parents are more interested in him being a great math student, rather than developing his strengths.

Rabbi Darren Levine 26:07

Now, some of these parents might say, well, he needs to be competitive in math. So he can do well on the SAT and get into the best university. Or they say, focusing on weaknesses, it develops grit, and grit is important for the world we live in today. So this all may be true, but

having grit and going to the best university does not always reflect the quality of the child's inner world, or their level of positivity and happiness or their well-being. So I've talked to you a little bit about, well, math, and a parenting approach that focuses on correcting for weaknesses. And we also talked about Becca's experience where praise parenting focuses on their performance. But I wanted to think with you that rather than focusing on weaknesses or praise parenting, that we focus on our child's strengths, and in this way helped to shape our young, emerging mensches.

Rabbi Darren Levine 27:15

So, here's how strengths based parenting emerged. It came on the scene several years ago by a professor at the University of Melbourne who is well known in the field of positive psychology and her name is Lea Waters. And here's what Lea Waters says, in describing what strengths are. She describes strengths as 'positive qualities that energize us and that we use, often in productive ways to achieve our goals. These traits are developed over time, and are recognized by others as praiseworthy.'

Rabbi Darren Levine 27:53

So, strengths based parenting, here's what strengths based parenting is really all about. It focuses on a child's character strength. Some character strengths, and on my website that I built, which is positive-judaism.org, and in the book I wrote called Positive Judaism, it presents 24 different character strengths. And you can easily take an online kind of quick test to identify what your signature strengths are. There are even tests for children and teens. But just to give you an example of some of the qualities or characteristics or strengths, these are things like optimism, bravery, creativity, gratitude, appreciation, kindness, resilience, and hope. So, these are a handful of strengths and as I mentioned, there are 24 of them.

Rabbi Darren Levine 28:55

So within just this short list, and let's just take a look at it again so we can get some language around the idea what strengths are, let's think about optimism and bravery, creativity, gratitude, appreciation, kindness, resilience and hope. So these are very diverse character strengths, which would give us a hint that what it means to raise a mensch will be something different for every child. There's not one definition of what it means to be a mensch. We might have an idea about what that means in our family and what we're witnessing in the development of our children, but it will look very different in your family, based on so many different factors. So this is the idea of how to develop strengths.

Rabbi Darren Levine 29:44

So let's go back to Becca in the school ground or in the playground for a minute just to think back about an alternative that Becca's mother might have if she was aware of this idea of strengths based parenting and how to utilize it in Becca's life. So for Becca's mother rather than just focusing on praise parenting, and saying things like, oh Becca, your rock pile is amazing. Her mother would say something like, honey, I can see how much creativity you brought to building this. Tell me about what you created. So just in that alone, what Becca's mother is doing is identifying creativity in Becca, and bring Becca some language around this. And she's

also inviting Becca to describe to her what Becca created. You see, to Becca's mother, Becca's mother might just see a rock pile. But in Becca's inner world and in her imagination, she might not think of that being a rock pile at all. She might be thinking of something radically different. So if Becca's mother were to say to her, Becca, tell me about what you created. Becca could say, well, this is a house. That's a very different insight into who Becca is. And Becca's mother's always saying, oh, Becca, honey, that rock pile is amazing. Becca might be thinking, it's not a rock pile mom! This is the house that I'm going to live with daddy in and then she's feeling, rock pile? My mom doesn't know anything about me.

Rabbi Darren Levine 31:24

So here's another example of something that I know a lot of children face, especially in middle school and maybe in their early high school years. And that's about bullying and feeling threatened. So how do you teach a child to respond to bullying or feeling threatened in public spaces? So often, or at least up until recently before I began to study bullying and the effects that it has on children, often a response that kids get to facing the challenge of bullying is trying to help them develop grit. So when a kid gets hit with a ball or gets put down by a peer, and they come home and they tell their parents, you know, a common reaction could be, Well, you've got to stand up for yourself. You've just got to learn how to be a man. Don't let that jerk get to you. But that really doesn't develop the child's strengths of behavior.

Rabbi Darren Levine 32:29

So, rather than inserting power statements, a parent could say something like, I can imagine it was very hard for you not to throw that ball back or throw back in insults, which took a lot of restraint and bravery. So restraint and bravery, and courage. Those are character strengths, and the parent who responded in that way just help their child identify their strengths by focusing on them, rather than reinforcing grit and fear.

Rabbi Darren Levine 33:09

So here's a little bit more about strengths based parenting, and putting kids in touch with their constellation of talents and character. So remember the rabbi in the Talmud who said that we must teach a child swim? Well, that translates to what you're trying to accomplish in Orlando, and your curriculum and your platform for positive education. So, the scientists which is trying to develop a person's character strengths, and the Jewish leader who is trying to teach their children to swim, they're more or less saying the same thing. It's adults who are actively identifying child's strengths and helping them to thrive.

Rabbi Darren Levine 34:01

And because positive education has been tracking how the field has been supporting the evolution in a healthy way of children, here's what the results are. The results are that children who know their character strengths, who can speak to them positively, who are surrounded in a culture of strength-based adult life, they are performing better in school, they have higher levels of academic achievement, they work better, they have higher levels of satisfaction. This is important for everybody especially today is that children who know their strengths and you have

them developed and identified by the adults around them, they have higher levels of physical fitness and healthy lifestyles. They have better self esteem and certainly for all of us who are watching our children, so addicted - and maybe that might be too much of a strong word, but I think that many of us parents fear it - is that they're addicted to these devices, which are raising their levels of depression, and reducing their ability to cope with stress and diversity. So strength based parenting can really help a child to develop positively in their life. And in my opinion, you know, this really is about what it means to help develop your mensch.

Rabbi Darren Levine 35:36

So that's a little bit about, you know, raising mensches, thinking about mensches, understanding how positive education, positive psychology interface very naturally and organically with Jewish living, Jewish wisdom, and of course, I could say much more, because this is really just the tip of the iceberg in what you're trying to accomplish I believe at your school, and within your children and your families in positive education. But I hope that it has given you a taste of how the fields naturally intersect, at least in my mind, and it seems like in the minds of your leaders and Alan and some of their parents in your school community that are really leading this charge. So maybe we'll take a break now, just for a minute now I'll turn it back to you. If there are questions Alan that you have or ideas that this stimulated, I'd be curious to know what they are, and for the parents who are on the call, or some of the families that have been listening, I'd be curious to know what your experience is. This is very new territory, and we're all in this together. So if we could maybe have a conversation, I'd be happy to hear your reactions. And clearly if you'd have any pressing questions about specifics of what's going on in your own individual home, I'd be happy to hear those and help to discuss them; my sense is that whatever you're feeling in your home more or less every other parent is feeling a variation of it anyways. So we're all we're all in the same boat. So Alan I'll turn it back to you.

Alan 37:06

Thank you, Rabbi, thank you very, very much. I think what we could do is you could turn on your mic, or you could just talk in the chat. I know, at least one of you is on the phone, so that's gonna be hard to chat. But if you want to turn on your mic, and if you have a question for Rabbi Levine, I think now now's a good time to ask. And I know that, I know some of the parents on this on this line. So I know you're not shy so don't, don't be shy. So if you have a question to ask in the chat, or just to unmute your mic and ask the question and then we could take it from there.

Amy Polacek 37:47

I have a question Alan.

Alan 37:49

Okay. Rabbi, this is Amy Polacek who is our Director of academics and very involved in the implementation of our work. Yes, go ahead.

Amy Polacek 38:05

Rabbi, this was a wonderful session. I have taken lots of notes. And my main question is, if we see as educators that our students are demonstrating some of the attributes that you mentioned, and how they feel about themselves and that they could use more positive praise and that not focus specifically on - I'm sorry, let me say that - not focus specifically on praise, but their character strengths, how do we gently pose that to the parents?

Rabbi Darren Levine 38:53

Well, Amy, I think that is a really good starting point. I think that in many ways it's about changing culture, and school communities I think can really lead the way in that. I think you're demonstrating that right now, just by gathering this set of families on the telephone together. I think that you will find very like-minded people in this search for wanting to raise mensches and to use positive education and strengths based learning. I would think that, in many ways, things that parents and maybe even your educators that you currently have on your staff, they've been hearing words like Social Emotional Learning over the past 20 years. And in many ways, strengths based parenting is an evolution from that. So I would think that shifting culture is one place to start. And one way that you could do it in a practical way, is by maybe hosting a series of events, either over Google Chat or in person when the dust settles on Coronavirus, but to start with your faculty, and to teach them about strengths based parenting, and to help them understand what their own strengths are. I think that could be very eye opening for your teaching faculty.

Rabbi Darren Levine 40:20

And then perhaps the next step is to help them to translate that into the classroom, and to support that with a learning curriculum for children. And I think that organically what will happen very quickly after that is that parents will begin to see that their children are learning about strengths in school, and they'll want to adopt those in the home. In my work, I have basically drawn a parallel to 24 different character strengths that have been more or less agreed upon by the science of well being as the as the key cornerstone strengths, and I've drawn parallels to Jewish values. And so being able to use both the scientific language and the Jewish term, can you know help people see that correlation in helping to, you know, think about how to do this, how to start with this. Does that begin to give shape to your question, Amy, or were you asking something different?

Amy Polacek 41:32

No. I think that was a wonderful response. And I do feel that we've already started that by having the conversation with our teachers, they are implementing the character strengths in their classes, which they've been doing all year, and they are sharing this information with the parents in their lesson plans and in communication conferences, so that that dialogue is already there. I think we can maybe set up the parent meetings strategically throughout the year to keep reinforcing it.

Rabbi Darren Levine 42:19

I think that's right. I also might suggest that if your school is really taking strengths based curriculum seriously, that that could become something that you include in your reporting back to the parents, so that what parents are getting is more than just a series of letters, or perhaps some narrative evaluation that other kids are doing. But the parents are also seeing in black and white, how their children are developing in their areas of strengths. That might also be feedback that parents can value.

Alan 42:55

Rabbi, we have a question in the chat, which I'd like to read. It's from Jennifer Hennessy, who is in one of the Carolinas, north or south. I don't remember, I think north. She said, how do you move forward with positive education successfully, when most upper level education still focuses on top performers and competitiveness after leaving JAO? And I think it's a really good question, which is probably on the minds of many of our families. So if you want to address that, that'd be great.

Rabbi Darren Levine 43:27

That came from Stephanie?

Alan 43:28

No, it's Jennifer.

Rabbi Darren Levine 43:33

Jennifer. Hi, Jennifer. Good morning. I think that's an important question. I think the question about how to move forward is something that we're thinking about now more than ever in our culture and about what values are most important to us. How we go forward, in many ways needs to begin with your own family and thinking about what is most important to Jennifer and her family. Is it most important to Jennifer and her family that her children are top competitors and are you grooming your child to get into Harvard, so they can have that on their resume? Are you boosting your children's extracurricular activities just to flesh out a full resume? Or are you trying to develop their humanness?

Rabbi Darren Levine 44:28

And of course, you're thinking, well, if we have this insight into strengths based parenting, and that's something that we're focused on with our child, well, then they're going to be less competitive, because all the other children are being driven by parents who just want them to succeed, succeed, succeed, perform, perform, perform, teach to test, teach to test, teach to test. Well, in the long run, that will not create a child that feels well about themselves.

Rabbi Darren Levine 45:00

So I think that what Alan, and it seems like Amy are trying to accomplish within your community is reevaluating what some of what the definition of success is, in raising a mensch and raising a child. We've all fallen, including me, we've all fallen prey to some of the social pressures of what it means to parent a successful kid, what the definition of success is. But we're also seeing that

on the back end of that, that is creating a lot of problems for children. And there's no secret that at Harvard for the past 15 years, the single most popular class is on happiness. And the reason why I believe that it is the single most popular class is because it's a student body that is confused about what happiness is and about well-being is.

Rabbi Darren Levine 46:04

So I think it has to start early. And I think that a lot of the answers to your question Jennifer really have to do with what your family values are, and where you want your child to be, and how you want them to live as an adult? Do you want them to be competitive? Do you want them to be happy? Do you want them to be feeling like they're living in a pressure cooker in a competitive state, or you want them to feel well and good in their lives and feel like they're making a positive contribution?

Alan 46:36

Thank you, Rabbi. I'm just gonna add to that. I also, I don't believe that these things are mutually exclusive. I think that we can still have a strong academic program and prepare kids for all the challenges that they're going to face academically, but I think as an educational institution, which is our to provide the foundation for for life for these students, we also have to consider their, their social emotional well being as well. So I think that we can accomplish all these things. I don't think that they are mutually exclusive. And as a matter of fact, I do believe and Rabbi alluded to that in his talk earlier, that when, when we build the positivity in our students and focus on their character strengths, it does help them in their scores in their academics and they're sleeping better and all the other things that the research and science has shown us. So they're they're, they're equally important and we have to strike that balance between providing for academic success and then providing for their social emotional well-being.

Rabbi Darren Levine 47:56

That's very well said Alan.

Alan 47:59

Any other questions before, before we conclude this morning? Well, I have. I just want to say

ilana ivan 48:13

Sorry, Alan, can I ask a question?

Alan 48:15

Oh, thank you. Thank you. I'm glad that you did because I was counting on you. Rabbi, this is Ilana, who I mentioned in our introduction, who was very, very instrumental, the- she was, she was the instrument that brought this to our school. So we are grateful and thankful and appreciative for, for Ilana, and all she's done to help change and transform our school culture. Please.

ilana ivan 48:42

Thanks, Alan. Rabbi, it was so nice to hear your whole lecture your whole speech, it was it was really great to hear. I'm also super interested in the way the intersection of positive psych and Judaism come together and I love that you brought the 'teaching to swim', because it's a metaphor for life and I think about it a lot. My question is more about generational. So as a strengths-based practitioner, I'm a coach, which is how I came to bring this to JAO. You know, I work a lot with my clients using strengths, I totally agree that the parents need to be educated as well about their own strengths, because it's only from understanding our strengths that we can even have that conversation with our kids. What I'm struggling with personally is, you know, we have, thankfully, grandparents, and grandparents tend to come from maybe a culture or a society or a belief that is not necessarily at odds with strengths based parenting and positive psych, but it's definitely more maybe old school or 'you got to struggle' if there's some conflict. And because the grandparents are involved in my kid's life, there's sometimes like different messages being sent in terms of the importance of the education or the grades or toughening up versus you know, how you feel or what your strengths are. So, I don't know if because you have a community and a congregation, you've dealt with maybe older people in this positive Judaism approach. And if you could just share any insights to that for those of us who, who have, you know, as Alan said, drunk the Kool Aid and get it and love it, and moving forward as a community where there might be some members of the community, even parents who you know, are a little resistant or skeptical. If you could talk to touch on that would be appreciated.

Rabbi Darren Levine 50:54

Well, Ilana, I think that's an important question. You know, maybe for context, just to understand language a little bit that could be helpful. I bet this is language that you already know since you're a strengths based coach. But I think in many ways it really kind of, you know, [inaudible] the question that Amy was asking earlier, and that is, you know, with the skeptics in our universe, they're skeptical about positivity in a lot of ways. I want to say that positive Judaism and positive psychology - well positive psychology of course, in some circles has got a very bad reputation, unfortunately, and mistakenly as like a field of happyology. And that's not really what positive psychology is. Positive psychology is not happyology. Happyology is something different. Happyology is just always telling someone, oh, just put a smile on your face. Well, that doesn't really develop a happy soul.

Rabbi Darren Levine 51:56

Positive psychology in kind of distinction to happyology, positive psychology and positive education, you know, the thrust of it is really using big data to understand how people can thrive in a world. It's moving them along a ladder, let's call it, from just surviving and surviving or doing a little bit better than surviving, and it's moving them up the ladder to living a life of thriving and really understanding, well, what is the life that wants to live in me? So this is also good context to you know, help respond to the question within your family or within your community, you know, with the skeptic in mind, or people who are new to this way of thinking. So positive Judaism is not happy Judaism. You know, a lot of times when we think about happy Judaism, at least the image that comes to my mind, you know, are children at summer camp in song

session, who are happy and joyful and singing, and everyone has a smile on their face and they're shvitzing from joy. Well, that is a happy image. But there is a lot of sophisticated work that is going on in that room. Those children are learning about what it means to be in community. Those children are learning what it means to trust others. Those children are learning what it means to experience a sense of joy within the context of Jewish life. And I don't think anybody can doubt that those are positive influences in helping a child to feel grounded in the world.

Rabbi Darren Levine 53:42

And, you know, I have parents too. So you know, we're a multi generational family. My parents are very involved in my children's lives. And, you know, it's it is a different generation. They I wouldn't say are overly skeptical or have difficulty in understanding, strengths learning. But, you know, they definitely came from an era because they were a first generation family who went to university and they grew up in, you know, kind of on the heels of the Depression, they certainly didn't have what we have in terms of access and the freedoms that we have. So I think that generally they have more of an edge. Well, I think the best way to remind ourselves about our parents and the influence that our parents have on our kids is by realizing that the primary parent, which is often the birth parent, they still have the most influence on a child's cultural inputs, not necessarily their DNA, but their cultural inputs and that amounts for a whole lot. So I want to, you know, encourage you to, you know, continue to try to establish good boundaries within your family system, and to you know, somehow to drag your parents along. And to help them understand I think that for you and for Amy, part of this is just going to have to be to establish a vision, and then just to drag everybody else along in that vision until they begin to understand and see what Alan will be doing and all of your faculty and he'll be able to document, you know, how children are feeling better and accomplishing more because of the new tools and the new language that you establish in your schools in your homes.

Alan 55:42

Thank you, Rabbi. And thank you, Ilana, for your question. We have time for one more question because I do want to end on time. This question is from Juliana. It's in the chat. She says how do we emphasize strengths during a pandemic and being stuck at home? She's a child psychologist and she's also a Jewish parent. She added that lots of kids aren't able to utilize their emerging strengths at this time. So I think it's a timely question. And I think we'll conclude on this one. Juliana, thank you for your question, Rabbi.

Rabbi Darren Levine 56:16

Hi, Julianna. Good morning. I think that is a very timely question. Well, we're all suffering under the brutality of this pandemic. And what it's done in the way that it's changed the way that we're able to live our lives, no doubt about it. You know, my children are upstairs right now in their rooms, doing their online learning for the day. it's sometimes difficult to get them out of their digital space, want to encourage them to get outside and play and walk and ride their bikes and get out to the parks you know, with social distancing, you know, at play. Yet, because we're at

home so much, it has allowed us to spend more time with each other, and we're always looking for different activities to do to pull them away from their screens and do more things as families.

Rabbi Darren Levine 57:11

So about 10 days ago, I guess at this point, we all re-took the strength based tests, and had a great conversation about it. I don't think that we need to give up on strengths based parenting during the time of COVID. I think actually, it could be a really interesting opportunity for all of us. So the conversation could be after you're able to see what the children's signature strengths are, is to engage them in conversation about well, how do you think your signature strengths play out in your lives, and to host a conversation over the dinner table about, Okay, well, we know that your signature strength, honey, is creativity. How do you think that you can draw on your creativity during this time when we're forced to be inside and live a little bit differently in order to help you and help all of us, as we get to know you better, because we now know that your strength is creativity - How are we going to use those strengths to help us thrive in this time when it's just so different?

Rabbi Darren Levine 58:15

And I would try to get away from using negative language around the time of Coronavirus. So rather than say, you know, this 'difficult time, it's so difficult for us to be together', I try to use language, 'it's very different for us at this time'. And so rather than think about terms of like, you know, oh, our lives are just so everything is changing so much, we're having such a difficult time with the change, it's 'things are very different right now and they're creating new opportunities for us to think differently and to behave differently, and how are we going to behave in a way that we're going to maintain what we've known about the world that we have lived in and what do we want to aspire to when the dust settles after Coronavirus', which it will.

Alan 59:08

Thank you, Rabbi. And I want to thank everyone for joining us this morning. I want to thank Ilana once again, I want to thank Amy, I want to thank all the parents who joined us today, I want to thank Rabbi Levine. As we said at the beginning, this is only the beginning. This is a conversation that I hope we will be able to continue as our school and your organization can continue to interact. And so that we can continue to change the lives of our students and change the lives of our our families, and our community. So thank you very much. Thank you everyone for attending again. And I really appreciate everyone's time today. And I hope everyone goes out and has a great day. Change the World and make our world a better place. Thank you, everyone. Thank you, Rabbi.

Rabbi Darren Levine 1:00:01

Thank you, Alan. Nice to meet everybody. Be well.

Alan 1:00:05

Rabbi, we'll be in touch. I really hope so.

Rabbi Darren Levine 1:00:08

Me too.

Alan 1:00:09

Okay. Thanks again and I look forward to continuing the conversation. All the best bye bye

Rabbi Darren Levine 1:00:18

bye bye