

הידיעון

HaYidion

SUMMER 2018

קייץ תשע"ח



**School
ADVOCACY**



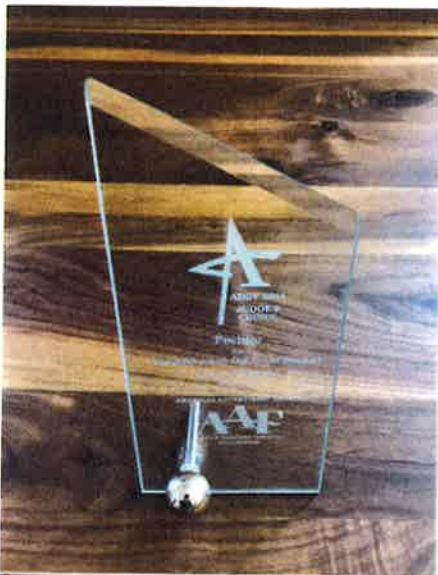
PRIZMAH

Center for Jewish Day Schools

RACHEL ARCUS-GOLDBERG
TALI ZELKOWICZ

The Story Behind Creating Our Story

THERE'S SOMETHING SPECIAL ABOUT THIS SCHOOL. THIS HAD BEEN OUR TAG LINE FOR OVER SEVEN YEARS. AFTER OUR FIRST VISITS AT THE SCHOOL, BOTH OF US BELIEVED IT WHOLEHEARTEDLY. OUR DIRECTOR OF ADMISSIONS AND MARKETING, AN ALUMNI PARENT HERSELF, ALSO BELIEVED IT DEEPLY. AND OUR STAFF AND FACULTY, AS WELL AS LONG TIME PARENTS, KNEW IT. BUT ALL OF THESE PEOPLE SHARE ONE IMPORTANT TRAIT: THEY HAVE ALREADY BEEN IN THE BUILDING, MANY TIMES. AND EVEN IF SOMEONE CAME THROUGH THE DOOR AND COULD FEEL WHAT WAS SPECIAL, FEW COULD USE SPECIFIC, NON-JARGON LANGUAGE TO NAME POWERFULLY JUST WHAT THAT "SPECIAL SOMETHING" WAS.



This lack of clarity around what made CJDS special was amplified by the fact that in the school's almost-20-year history, it had never allowed itself to proclaim with pride and clarity from the rooftops of Central Ohio what it was and why it existed. Recognizing this dilemma allowed us to overcome the many cautions we received from heads of other small Jewish day schools about investing limited funds in professional marketing materials. In the majority view, it just wasn't worth the money. What was? Ambassadorship. That was what they all unanimously recommended over marketing.

After many in-depth conversations with trusted colleagues at day schools large and small across the country, we saw that ambassadorship was, indeed, an answer to the key challenges of recruitment and retention. But there was a catch: Effective ambassadors must know what they are communicating, how to communicate it, and above all, *why* their cause is so important. As Simon Sinek of TED TALK fame has put it, we needed to learn how to "communicate with people's guts."

So, we sought ways to find our voice. We knew that we wanted our voice to be *true, unapologetic and memorable*. We needed to find a group of creatives who could help us capture the imaginations of a wide range of families who might be mission-appropriate but not know it. We found Fechtor Advertising, a local advertising firm whose work was consistently true, unapologetically bold and memorable. They had just provided the

Columbus Jewish Family Services agency with a branding makeover. If they could message heavy content like refugees and Holocaust survivors with bold, memorable, and even playful images and text such as, "We're more than 3800 years old. We understand what it takes to care for seniors," all the more so, we reasoned, could they do great things for a community liberal Jewish day school.

The process took eight months, start to print. We contracted with Fechtor to produce a viewbook with a new tag line (whose content could, in turn, be used by us or them to produce a brochure, ads, posters, banners, annual reports, fundraising materials) and to redo our website with the same look and voice of the viewbook. But the time spent finding that voice, at least five months, was easily as valuable as the product itself and spent in what advertisers call "discovery." Discovery included developing the overarching *brand strategy* and the resulting *creative strategy* (both defined below).

From our point of view, these crucial months were the thorough, probing, soul searching "self-study" we needed so badly. It was like receiving the most gratifying philosophical and conceptual massage, as they worked out kinks and tensions that had for years prevented the school from communicating its tremendous depth and complexity in elegant, accessible and visually stunning ways.

Fechtore's team engaged in online interviews, came to the school in person to feel the "something special," pored over a 2013

Columbus Jewish demographic study, reviewed a recent sample grant application, studied our staff and faculty bios, and read pages of testimonials about “Why choose CJDS?” and select excerpts from Abraham Joshua Heschel, whose teaching and thinking serve as the foundation for our school philosophy. Most significantly, however, they engaged in 30- to 60-minute interviews with more than 20 individual founders, alumni parents, alumni students, grandparents, staff and faculty, board members, donors, and community members and leaders. They processed all of that data and presented us with a first draft of a brand strategy by last June.

A brand strategy is your reason for being; it should differentiate you from others and be true to an enduring essence of the organization. At least for this firm, a brand strategy consists of Purpose, Values, Personality, Positioning and Promise. Each of those five components went through several drafts and edits; although that work usually remains unpublished, the process of formulating these items is an invaluable exercise, one that anchors everything that follows. The final iteration of our Purpose and our Promise did go public and can be found in the viewbook:

We exist to strengthen the Jewish community and the world by helping to develop thinking, feeling, centered, whole people. ... We promise to give your child the foundation that he or she needs to add real value to relationships, life, and the world.

The next step was to develop our creative strategy, which has the specific objective of

speaking to the “kishkes” of our target audiences through words and pictures (target audiences include parents, potential students, donors, alumni, existing students and grandparents). It includes the single most important thing you want people to both think and feel. As Fechter put it to us, “The value of the brand is to stand for something, and the value of the creative strategy is to be able to talk to all different people and target audiences.”

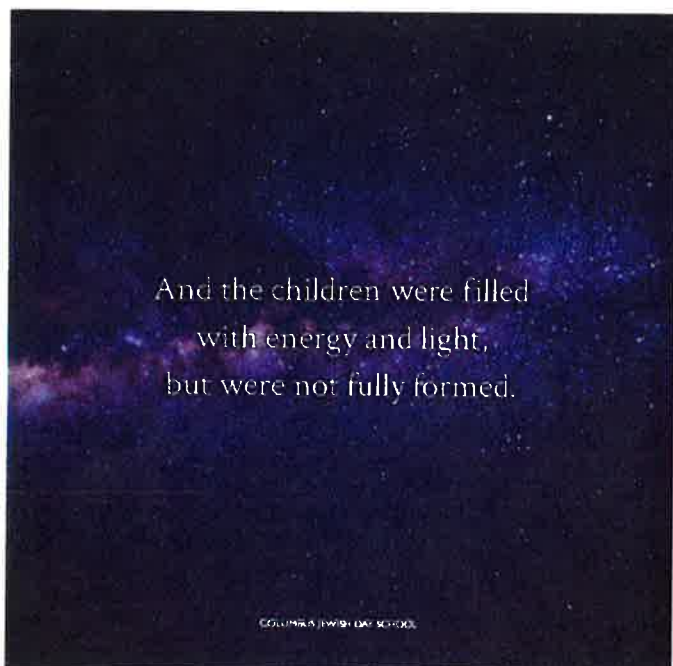
By last August, we were presented with three distinct campaign options, which led with three different voices: Critical Thinking, Menschlichkeit and Joy. All three spoke truths about us; we had to choose one and only one. No mashups allowed (we asked). Each had a different aesthetic, color palette, format, and ultimately, story to tell. Joy grabbed all of us instantaneously, but it also terrified us. The other two, Critical Thinking and Menschlichkeit, felt the *safest* stories to tell. While absolutely central to our values and practice, Critical Thinking and Menschlichkeit felt similar if not identical to stories told by our local non-Jewish independent and public schools and other Jewish day schools.

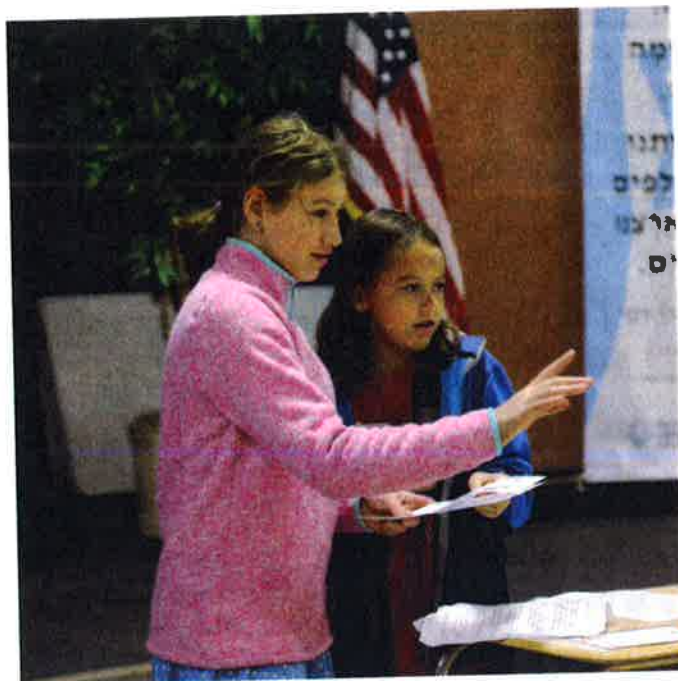
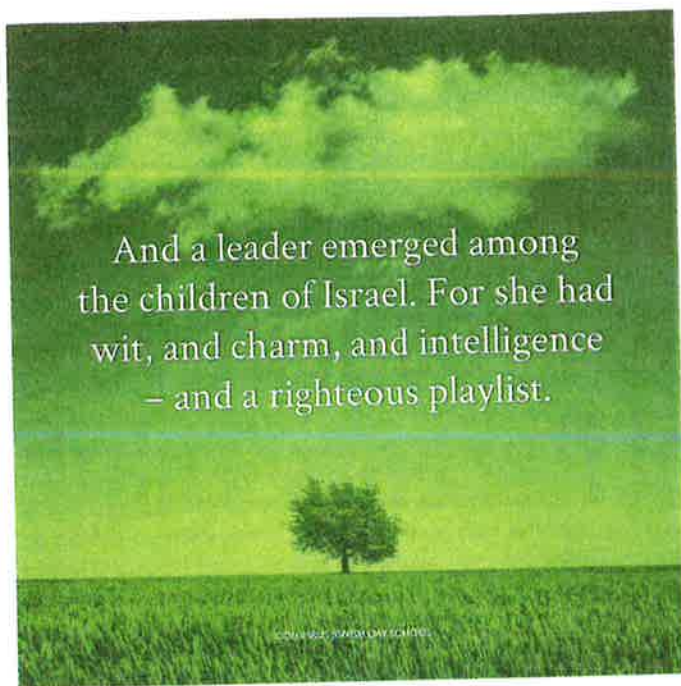
The story we hadn’t told was how much fun it was to learn in a Jewish day school, how cool it was to blend Jewish and general learning daily, in all sorts of new and contemporary ways. At CJDS, we often talk about our curriculum as being one that allows our students to grow into their authentic selves—not as sometimes Jewish and sometimes “general,” but all of it, all the time. Our new viewbook depicted that story with language such as, “In the beginning, there was Kindergarten. And

the children were filled with energy and light, but were not fully formed.” They used the language of Torah to produce “punchlines” that took classical, ancient text for playful spins. This campaign immediately felt right to us, but it also felt risky. Would it offend people? Confuse them? Freak them out?

We banked everything on “no.” But it wasn’t easy to take that leap. Together with board members who joined us at this final decision-making stage, we all decided that we hadn’t engaged in this process to tell someone else’s story. It took tremendous courage, both because of the message itself and the manner in which it was being told. But it was clear that everyone felt and knew deeply that this story was uniquely ours, and that was ultimately what empowered us to move forward.

Even after we made the leap to choose Joy, we spent about two more months emailing and phone conferencing with our marketing partners, editing each line and commenting upon each word on each spread. Seemingly small choices proved capable of changing an entire philosophy. To take just one example: The fifth spread in the viewbook originally read, “And a leader emerged among the children of Israel. For she had wit, and charm, and intelligence—and really good cookies.” The image we had for that text initially showed a much younger first-grade boy, for whom “cookies” made more sense. But even for a young boy, we did not feel that “really good cookies” was as strong a playful spin, or as aligned with our CJDS soul. So we searched for a new image and landed on one of a sixth-grade girl that allowed us to feature our commitment to





egalitarian values. We wrote to them that the cookies line no longer has “anything to do with the [girl’s] leadership traits, and, actually serves to undermine the feminist message.” After much back and forth, a new “punchline” eventually emerged: “And a leader emerged among the children of Israel. For she had wit, and charm, and intelligence – and a righteous playlist.” Thus, we were able to further root the content in the students’ actual lived, contemporary American realities and our core values.

This is but one of several examples of how having time towards the end of the process to sleep on the wording, and to arrive at the right marriages between image and message, was so essential. Even the cover was still emerging through September, and by October we had changed some word or comma in no fewer than half of the 10 spreads. But thank goodness we had a hard deadline of our November Open House, to ensure the viewbook finally went to print. Shortly thereafter, we also went live with our new website (www.cjds.org).

Our team at Fechter Advertising has been as proud and excited about their product as we are. Indeed, of the six awards they won at the 2018 American Advertising Awards, one was for the CJDS Viewbook, which also snagged the coveted Judge’s Choice Award. CJDS was featured in a *Business Journal* slideshow covering the highlighted winners.

We believe there are at least six aspects of the relationship with Fechter that contributed to a final product that leads every constituent who sees it, be they alumni, founders, board members, or current parents and faculty, to report the following experience: “They totally got us.”

- From the beginning, it was clear Fechter was “hooked” on who we are and what we stand for. In fact, instead of interviewing a handful of the dozens of names we gave them as was the original plan, they were so taken, they talked with *all* of them. At the same time, we also appreciated what they stood for; we trusted their creative process and knew what we were getting in their creative values.
- Our team of three staff and, by design, no more—director of admissions and marketing, the principal and the head of school—met regularly and almost always in person with Fechter’s same team of two or three creative executives.
- Fechter pushed us hard to make excruciating values clarifications. And we trusted them, allowing them to do it even, especially, when it felt scary and risky.
- We pushed back hard to clarify who we are and who we are not, and we explained why every time.
- Fechter asked us for feedback and notes on every stage. And we gave it to them each time, in a coherent voice. We never made them communicate with multiple committees or manage divergent opinions among us. (We resolved those issues internally.)
- The timeline for production was visited (and when necessary, revisited) collaboratively and explicitly.

Overall, for CJDS, the “ambassadorship vs. marketing” dilemma necessitated a *both-and* solution. While we have begun working on our ambassador program in the past few years, our primary focus has been on marketing. And it has worked! We have worked

with our faculty, board members, parent organization and families to have a unified message about what the school does and where it is going. We have distributed our viewbook to hundreds of families throughout Central Ohio. We are hearing in person from parents of very diverse backgrounds that they love reading this storybook.

Just as important, we are also learning that their kids love reading our storybook, which was one of the conscious hopes of our design. We imagined children curling up in bed with our viewbook, turning through the pages and imagining themselves in the story. It has also become the ideal talking piece for potential donors and for recruiting potential new lay leaders. Although it is still early in the long ongoing arc that is recruitment, we do see that we are beginning to capture people’s imaginations *before* they set foot on campus. Over and over, we hear that there is a buzz throughout the community and that it is positive, energized and exciting. Our enrollment is up at least 20% for our incoming kindergarten class. It is hard to know what have been the most significant factors, but we are quite confident that we could never have generated this buzz throughout the community without a clear, bold, story to tell that reflects deeply who we are.

Next, we are looking to a program like Atidenu, Prizmah’s strategic recruitment and retention intensive, to maximize the power of our new story and take ambassadorship to a whole new level, now that we can say and *show* who we are and why we exist.