

Learning Hebrew with pennies, noodles and shaving cream

By Susie Davidson

“See these pennies and coins? We shine them up with vinegar and salt. That way, the kids learn a little science. Then they count them, and learn a little math.”

Shifra Schwartz was talking about just one of the unconventional teaching tools she uses at the Hebrew School of the Arts. The Tuesday afternoon program will begin its second year in September at the Chai Center in Coolidge Corner.

Over the course of the semester, as shiny coins slowly fill the jars, the students also get a lesson in tzedakah. The students face the question of what to do with the money and, after hearing several ideas from Schwartz, decide where to donate it.

“If kids are given the proper incentive, it can be exciting for them to learn,” said Schwartz at last month’s open house at the school. “Our program is extremely interactive. It is very stimulating, and hands-on.”

She quoted an anonymous poem posted on the school’s Web site:

*Teach me and I’ll forget
Show me, I may remember,
Involve me,
and I’ll show interest,
Excite me and I’ll ask
for more.*

Looking at the colorful displays around the room, one could almost hear the squeals of kids and see their faces and hands smeared with paint and clay and glitter.

The Chai Center, a Lubavitch Chabad house, also offers Friday night Shabbat dinners with stand-up comedy by Rabbi Mayshe Schwartz; Saturday services; and holiday and other events focused on Jewish life at venues throughout Boston.

The Hebrew School of the Arts is part of a range of educational programs. Students from all denominations, practicing or non-practicing, are welcomed. A payment plan is available, and no child is turned

away for lack of funds.

Schwartz, a Miami native, has a degree in early education from the Chabad-affiliated Beth Rivka school in New York. She previously operated her own Hebrew high school in Westford and taught pre-K students at the New England Hebrew Academy in Brookline.

“Shifra is deeply dedicated to the students,” said Beth Silverberg Marx of Brookline, whose two daughters are enrolled. “Each week, Shifra comes up with creative activities that dovetail beautifully with the learning the students are doing at her school.”

One of Schwartz’s tools is Aleph Champion, a program used by chabads worldwide. Students earn a certificate and bracelet each time they advance to the next level. They begin as White Aleph Champs and work their way through the rainbow until they become Black Aleph Champs like their teachers.

Students sharpen their skills using a small table sandbox with Hebrew letters, an “Aleph-Bet” book, a Torah Bank and a large Hebrew letter board. Then there is an assortment of more unusual learning aids, such as coffee filters, noodles, wood chips, tiles, scrub brushes and shaving cream. “I even use toothbrushes for painting,” said Schwartz.

Where does she get her stuff? “All over. I love to shop.”

Besides language lessons, the Hebrew school includes Jewish history and traditions; and discussions about Torah and everyday life.

Schwartz has one other teacher, but as the school grows, she plans to add more. Last year, seven students were enrolled. “We expect to double our enrollment this year,” she said, noting that a lot of phone calls have come in.

The Chai Center’s youngest students aren’t even a year old. The Mommy and Me program involves mothers and children from newborns to 3 years old in

songs, art, dance, movement, play and exercise (including mommy yoga). The First Taste Program, for ages 3-5, incorporates more songs, art, theater and games.

The center also offers a Bar/Bat Mitzvah Discovery Course for ages 11-13, which focuses on Jewish adulthood beyond the big event. Each month features a M.A.D. (Make A Difference) effort that gives back to the community.

For information on classes, visit www.getchai.com, email shifra@getchai.com, or call 617-278-2424.



PHOTOS BY SUSIE DAVIDSON

Teacher Shifra Schwartz: “I even use toothbrushes for painting.”




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Naomi Eylath of Brookline shows off a mosaic tzedakah box she created at an open house for the Hebrew School of the Arts.

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