

Rashi Social Justice Coordinator Stephanie Rotsky Honored by Covenant Foundation

Each year the prestigious Covenant Foundation, as part of its mission to strengthen educational endeavors that perpetuate Jewish heritage and identity, honors three outstanding Jewish educators. In 2005 one of the honorees was Rashi's Social Justice Coordinator, Stephanie Rotsky.



Stephanie joined the Rashi faculty in 1986 after receiving a graduate degree from the Hornstein Jewish Professional Leadership Program at Brandeis University. She taught second grade for several years before assuming her current position, which is unique in the field of education in the United States. Stephanie works with teachers, students, and families to infuse social justice themes, curricula, and programming throughout the school community. Over the years, she has created many innovative projects including the Tamchui Purim Philanthropy Project and an all-school civil rights unit of study anchored in Jewish text.

Her commitment to connect learning with action has become the hallmark of her work. Stephanie helps students of all ages realize their power and responsibility as Jews to pursue justice and repair the world. She helps students develop and implement mitzvah ideas and hands-on action projects, ensuring that ideas are taken seriously and translated into efforts to change the world. She writes:

"Each time I am part of an experience that enables students to be heard and feel empowered, to take action and make a difference, confirms for me that social justice – a core value of The Rashi School – is not only a value to talk about but one that must be examined, taught, nurtured, experienced, and lived daily. I pursue this value every day with the 300 students at the school.

I walk the hallways at Rashi every day, and I never really know just where my stroll will take me, but I know that I am never walking alone with my passion and commitment to bring *tikkun*, *chesed*, and *tzedek* to the world. I am accompanied and often led by students, parents, and teachers on this journey. Every day I walk with others who believe that they can, that they must, make the world a better place."

In 2008 Stephanie was featured in *A Covenant of Dreams: Realizing the Promise of Jewish Education*, a 128-page commemorative book published by The Covenant Foundation to mark its eighteenth (*chai*) anniversary. The book celebrates in words and pictures the work of those who received Covenant Foundation grants and Covenant Awards during the last eighteen years.

For more information, go to <http://www.covenantfn.org/website/>

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Stephanie was also featured as one of the "Voices of Good People" on the Good People Fund website. Below is an excerpt of her article "Untangling the Mysteries of How to Repair the Brokenness in our World." For the complete article, go to: <http://goodpeoplefund.org/gvoice.php?page=2>

Repairing the brokenness in our world and pursuing justice are central mandates within Judaism. In Deuteronomy 16:20, we are taught: *tzedek, tzedek tirdof* – "justice, justice shall you pursue so that you may live." But recently I was struck by what could be seen as mixed messages. Judaism stresses the importance of *kavod* (respect) for the *tzedakah* recipient. To that end, according to Maimonides, the highest form of *tzedakah* is giving and receiving anonymously. If this is so, how are we as Jews supposed to do this repair work and from whom are we supposed to learn it?

Earlier this year, while helping lead *tefila* (prayers) in a second grade class, I shared the well known story of "If Not Higher," by I.L. Peretz to illuminate the theme of *tzedakah* in our teaching about the High Holidays. The story focuses on a community and its rabbi at the High Holidays. The rabbi is nowhere to be found in the mornings as the holidays are drawing near. One of the rabbi's students decides to sneak into his house and hide under his bed and sees the rabbi disguising himself as a woodsman and traveling into the forest to deliver wood to those who are homebound, ill and elderly. This rabbi's actions follow Maimonides' ladder of *tzedakah* that teaches that anonymity is the highest level of *tzedakah*.

Our greatest teachers of *tikkun olam* (repair of the world) not only show us how to respond to the myriad needs in our world, but they also demonstrate how humility, empathy and *kavod* are at the core of their work. There is a wealth of teachable moments every time someone's story and good work can be shared with others. It should not take a student to hide under his/her teacher's bed to untangle the mysteries of how one can repair the world. Would this town have fared differently if the rabbi had publicly shared his personal passion to ensure that every elder had heat in his home and then described how he went about doing it? Or, if the rabbi's story and mitzvah work set off deeper questions within his community and congregation as to how they could reach out and make a difference? It is for this reason that, at Rashi, we combine the exploration of Jewish texts about *tzedek* and *tikkun olam* with face-to-face encounters with "good people" who share their stories. This arrangement provides our students with both the "why" we have this mandate and the "how" to go about fulfilling it.

An important aspect of our social justice curriculum is identifying "Tzedakah Heroes," spotlighting their good work, and creating opportunities for students to meet some of these people. They listen as each hero's powerful story addresses the questions: why this "problem" bothered me, what I thought I could do to respond to it, what was the most challenging part of making it happen, whom did I get help from, and what made it successful? These are the stories that inspire students to engage in their own acts of *tikkun olam*.

Let us not hide the good work we are doing in the name of anonymity, humility and *kavod*. Instead, let us find every opportunity to have our students meet face-to-face with these people and find their passions in the stories that are shared.

Trying to untangle the mystery of why there is so much suffering in the world can be daunting. Learning how to repair the world from people in our midst need not be.