

Alumni and Teachers Come Together to Celebrate Their Years at Schechter

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By Abigail Pickus, (SSDS '86)

These days they're doctors and teachers and novelists and accountants. They're husbands and wives and parents and even grandparents. But when they entered the home (and sukkah) of Andrea (SSDS '82) and Ben Leshem on Sunday evening, October 8, these Solomon Schechter Day School Alumni and teachers from the 1970s and 1980s were transported back to those magical formative years.

“There are no words to thank you enough for the pleasure you ALL gave me!!! PLEASE convey to each and every one of the attendees my gratitude for the warmth I felt from them toward me!!! It was an evening to be remembered and also to be grateful for !!! הבר הדות !!!” wrote Shoshana Eselevsky (pictured below), a much beloved first grade Hebrew teacher about the reunion that drew more than 100 people from throughout Chicago, Los Angeles and even as far away as China.



These alumni were among the first students to attend Solomon Schechter Day School of Metropolitan Chicago, which launched in 1962 with 27 kindergartners and first graders. The founders and parents who believed in the Schechter dream were taking a risk on a new idea: building a school that would weave together the best of General and Judaic Studies so that students could understand and experience their Jewish and American lives as one integrated whole. Their gamble paid off. Since the school's founding, nearly 3,000 Schechter alumni live all over the world and are working in every profession imaginable. While every Schechter graduate is unique, what unites them is their commitment to Jewish life and values and their lifelong connection to their friends and to Solomon Schechter Day School.



For Charlotte Glass, Head of School Emeritus, pictured above, seeing so many former students and fellow staff at the reunion was the fruition of a dream. "For all of us who dreamed the dream so many years ago it has come to fruition in the generations of people right here. We see younger graduates. We see older graduates. We see parents of children in the school. It is amazing," she said.

Joining Mrs. Glass at the reunion were former Schechter teachers Dalia Ness, fourth grade Hebrew teacher, Isabel Soffer, middle school English teacher, Dina Siegel, first grade English teacher who taught alongside Geveret Eselevsky, Barbara Palatnik, Kindergarten teacher, and Nancy Shapiro, fourth grade general studies teacher.

For Steven Greenbaum (SSDS '80), the reunion was a special night. "Having the teachers there was a highlight for everyone. I couldn't stop gushing about how great it was when I got home!" he said.



Like many of his fellow alumni, Steve is a Schechter parent himself, as are the evening's hosts, Andrea and Ben Leshem. SSDS Board President Brian Hoffman (SSDS '81) and his wife, Melanie, are also parents of three Schechter alumni. Brian, the first alum to serve as Board President, says he is proud to follow in the footsteps of his father, David Hoffman, who also served as President of the Schechter Board.

Ilana Weisenberg (SSDS '87) a Schechter parent, said she is proud of her family's life-long connection to Schechter. "My Schechter education instilled in me a love for Judaism and a strong sense of Jewish identity. Schechter provided my parents, siblings and me a community like no other. The bonds we have created span over 38 years. I am blessed to send my girls to Solomon Schechter and to give them the opportunity my parents have given me. L'dor V'dor!" Ilana's brother, Aaron Epstein (SSDS '89), and his wife, Jodi, also send their children to Schechter, and Iana and Aaron's mother, Linda Epstein, was a beloved general studies teacher at Schechter.

Abigail Pickus (SSDS '86), who co-chaired the reunion with Sara (Rosenfeld) Coven (SSDS '75), Diane (Kushnir) Halivni (SSDS '84), and Sari Steinberg (SSDS '82), credits Schechter with giving her a solid foundation in life.

"Many of the friends I made back in kindergarten 40 years ago are still my best friends today," said Pickus. "Beyond an amazing core group of friends, I feel like what Schechter gave me was a very healthy connection to my Jewishness. I have such a deep knowledge of bible, prayers, the holidays, a connection to Israel and much more – but for me, being Jewish is positive and inclusive. And I owe that to my Schechter education."



The strong showing of alumni and sense of community at the reunion meant so much to Linda Foster, CEO/Head of School. "Looking out at all of you, I am so aware of the importance of always acknowledging and learning from our wonderful past, while we focus on our energetic present, and prepare for our exciting and ambitious future. And I hope you will all remain a part of our present and future so that we can continue to

teach and inspire a new generation of students to live and learn to their highest potential as Jews, as Americans and as citizens of the world.

Thanks to co-chairs Sara (Rosenfeld) Coven (SSDS '75), Diane (Kushnir) Halivni (SSDS '84), Abigail Pickus (SSDS '86) and Sari Steinberg (SSDS '82) for organizing the reunion, and to their committee, Emily (Saltzman) Gottlieb (SSDS '89), Benjamin Halperin (SSDS '87), Allison Kamen (SSDS '86), Dina Lissoos (SSDS '76), Liz Marder (SSDS '75), Nina Pickus (Rachel Pickus' (SSDS '80) daughter), Avrom Simon (SSDS '75), Melissa Weiss Spellman (SSDS '79), Laurie Suppo Spitz (SSDS '80), David Stern (SSDS '75) and Ilana (Epstein) Weisenberg (SSDS '87).