

# Thirty Days Hath Tishrei

## by Bonnie Lipton

The conventional wisdom is that Jewish students do well in school because for millennia the Jewish people have put such a high value on education. I have no wish to argue -- in this case I think the conventional wisdom is true -- but as America's youngsters return to school it occurs to me that we need to add a nuance to our understanding of Jews and education.

I believe Jewish students excel because the Jewish calendar and the school calendar -- both of which grew out of agricultural cycles -- parallel and reinforce one another. When I was a kid, going back to school in September was always a big deal. Everything was new -- from pencils and pencil cases to crayons, rulers and shoes. Would I start the year with a two-ring or three-ring binder? How much lined paper and how much graph paper? These were momentous questions and I started preparing weeks in advance.

Once the tools were in place the more substantive changes came. There were new textbooks and new teachers. Indeed, every September brought a new beginning in which I thought about what I would do for the coming year.

The first day of school was, of course, always close to Rosh Hashana and preparations for one typically crossed with preparations for the other. Though I didn't recognize it as a child, the kind of searching and resolving that I did for one was similar to what I did for the other. Wasn't the determination to start school on the right foot similar to the promises I made to myself on Yom Kippur? Wasn't the new art gum eraser, designed to clear mistakes from my slate, like the bread crumbs I tossed into Lake Michigan during *tashlikh*?

Back-to-school rituals provide structure and discipline for the year to come. The rituals of the Jewish calendar represent, I believe, not so much an adding of skills for dealing with the world but a squaring of them. In my home, the talk about school and the discussions about the holidays buttressed one another and gave me an extra push. I'm sure it was the same for many of you then, and for your children and grandchildren today.

It's not just the atmosphere in September but parallels throughout the year that help the school and Jewish calendars reinforce each other. There are times to work and times to rest, times to study and times to test what we have learned. The year proceeds in an orderly march until the rite of passage that comes at the end -- followed by increased understanding and responsibilities.

The parallels, of course, were never perfect. I went to public schools, which did not close for Jewish holidays, and in most years the Jewish students took time off for the High Holidays just a few days into the new school year. But in retrospect I think we learned from experience even when the two calendars worked against each other. I wouldn't trade today's open society and acceptance of differences for anything, but I think the need to explain Jewish holidays and rules to sometimes unsympathetic teachers and classmates sharpened the coping skills of my generation.

The rhythms of the Jewish and school calendars stay with you for life, and I have a good feeling whenever this season approaches. I remember the family atmosphere, the smell of autumn and the sense of independence as I faced classes and God on my own.

*This article was reprinted with permission from the August/September 2000 issue of Hadassah Magazine. Bonnie Lipton is the National President of Hadassah, The Women's Zionist Organization of America, and lives in Springfield, Massachusetts.*