

Jewish Heritage Contest inspires around the world

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If there's one word behind Torah Atlanta's international Jewish Heritage Contest, it's "preservation." It's preservation of what the middle-school educational competition is named for, yes, but also preservation of writing skills in a world of instant messages, blogs and blazingly-fast news delivery.



Halpern

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Back in 2002, Halpern finally acted on an idea he'd been shy about sharing for years: A challenge to Atlanta's Jewish students to pen their best essay of personal connection to their people and faith. The concept was met with enthusiastic response from Janice Alper, then head of Jewish Educational Services, and the Contest subsequently became part of Teacher Appreciation Night at the Center for Jewish Educa-

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"Good writing skills are something that everybody needs to learn in this age of texting," Rick Halpern, TA founder and director, said with a smile. "Complete sentences and articulate communication are necessary, but sometimes abandoned today."

tion and Experience, successor to JES. The folding of CJEE in the middle of the past decade presented an obstacle, but with the help of community member Chana Shapiro, Halpern did more than keep the JHC alive. By networking extensively and forming personal relationships with teachers and administrators, the two took a humble metro-area event and expanded to a global scale.

"Just having contacts, that's all one really needs," Shapiro said, then laughed. "Most educators are happy to have an excuse to get their kids to do their best writing."

Over time, the categories for submissions have changed – investigative pieces have been dropped, poetry has been added, and the line between the personal anecdote or true story and creative work has been more clearly defined – while the overall point has remained the same. A contestant should demonstrate understanding of Jewish history or a Jewish concept in cohesive, artistic fashion.

Themes like the Holocaust and the Exodus crop up every year, as new students come of eligible age and are inspired to express their own unique

reactions to major events in Jewish history. When he evaluates and compares, Halpern loves to see a bit of creativity but tries

hard not to bias himself against an entry similar to a prior winner.

"On the one hand, I have to look at each year as a totally fresh thing, not judge based on past submissions; the kids who are writing on a topic now, they've never written on it before," he said before dropping the vaguest of hints:

"[But] we should be encouraged about the Jewish future, too, the future we're heading into. I want that to be a source of inspiration for writing going forward."

Regardless, he calls upon Shapiro and others to assist in selecting first, second and third place for each genre plus several honorable mentions. Some writers recognized in 2011 (all available online at jewishheritagecontest.com) include



students from Georgia, New York, California, Texas and South Africa.

Whereas Torah Atlanta can expect to

receive total annual submissions in the hundreds – and that's where Halpern would like it to stay, as he calls this "only a hobby" with a smile – participating kids also receive plenty of significance in return. Besides the potential of a monetary reward for a top-three finish, such a goal-oriented activity is proven to challenge and better a child's skills.

"That's a good thing, to give a kid a chance to be a writer with something that's not assigned, just to find something they really want to research and write about," Shapiro said. "That's a worthy activity, to create a situation in which a child can choose to be a writer, not for a grade and not to be put up on the wall but to simply put him- or herself out there as a writer."

Evolution of Torah Atlanta

Torah Atlanta began with a sole purpose of counter-missionary work, welcoming folks back to the fold of Judaism after converting to another faith or otherwise losing touch with their religion.

"I came to realize that a lot of people left Judaism because they did not have a positive experience with their Jewish identity or education," Rick Halpern, TA founder and director, said. "I'm very committed to coming up with creative, out-of-the-box ways of reaching out to and educating people."

Halpern set about his mission by crafting "Choose Life: A Counter-Missionary Study Guide," which was later supplemented with a foreword by well-known Rabbi Tovia Singer, picked up by Baltimore-based Jews for Judaism as the international foundation's primary literature and awarded a grant for Russian translation from the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta.

He further entrenched himself in the philosophical and academic realms with "The Vision of Isaiah," and to this day he regularly fields questions and challenges from folks around the world via e-mail and speaks to congregations

and college classes alike.

Still, to tag the man as just an academic would be a mistake; in a completely separate effort, he and Torah Atlanta have completely renovated Mt. Zion in Israel. What started with a chance encounter with a Diaspora Museum employee in a Jerusalem hardware store became major improvements to several older buildings in the historically significant area as well as the establishment of the Diaspora Yeshiva's youth hostel.

"It was the most expensive trip to the hardware store I'll ever have in my life," Halpern laughed good-naturedly. "But now, if you want to spend Shabbos in the Old City with your group or class, contact the Diaspora Yeshiva

– they've got a facility."

That flexibility that comes with having one's own entity – the chance to work on a diverse array of projects – is what Halpern loves about his day-to-day.

"I'm an opportunist; I'm just going to wait and see what's next," he smiled. "The way Torah Atlanta is now versus five years ago versus five years before that, it's evolved. So who knows what tomorrow will bring?"

