

## **Choosing Homeschooling**

by [Viva Hammer](#)

One day when my son was four years old, he came home and announced that school was stupid and boring and that he didn't want to go. For a while after this announcement, my husband and I encouraged Mikhael to keep going to nursery in the mornings. Some days one of us accompanied him; other days we watched him get on the bus alone and in tears. We were perplexed by Mikhael's distress because for over a year he had been happy about going each day.

We certainly did not want school to make Mikhael miserable. What kind of lesson would that be in the joy of learning? At the time Mikhael made his announcement my husband was finishing his Ph.D., so we took advantage of his flexibility and kept our son home through the end of the year. Suddenly we were faced with a question we'd never considered before: What should we teach our child, and how should we do it? We had always assumed we would delegate educational decisions to trained professionals, and enrich our children's lives around the edges. Now, we were it.

Of course, our son was only four, and his needs were modest. But the questions Mikhael forced us to examine started us on a journey that we are still on today. We looked in libraries and bookstores, and spoke to other parents. Some admonished us to continue forcing our son to go to school, saying that it was normal for children to be tearful about attending, and normal for them to be bored when they got there. After all, they said, isn't life mostly about doing things you don't want to do? But we didn't feel comfortable with that approach, so we looked for another solution.

There is a whole culture of parents who teach their children at home, we discovered, called homeschoolers. There are several email lists linking these families, some geographically, and some denominationally. I discovered a substantial group of homeschooling families in the town where I live. Homeschooling parents, both online and in person, welcomed and supported us, offering to share books and equipment, and spent time helping us set up a teaching framework.

### **Available Choices**

So what did we do with Mikhael? Since we weren't yet required by law to cover specific secular subjects, we concentrated on his Jewish learning. Although Bible stories and digests are popular with this age, I preferred the actual Torah text itself. I started reading the book of Genesis with him, translating it, and talking about it. Not in a complicated fashion, just concentrating on the plain meaning of the text.

My husband had an interest in the Prophets, so he and Mikhael began the Book of Samuel together. And in connection with this, they studied Maimonides' Laws of Prophecy. We were relaxed about all the learning, and followed no particular timetable, but very soon Mikhael was urging us on, waking my husband at six in the morning, unable to wait to find out what was going to happen next with David, Saul and Jonathan.

Mikhael went back to school the following year, but we did not stop learning Torah with him, as we had come to view ourselves as his primary educators.

Somewhere in the middle of kindergarten, we began thinking about where to send Mikhael to first grade. Looking around at the available choices, we were having trouble finding anything to fit us both religiously and educationally. We wanted a warm, nurturing environment with strong Jewish content -- one that would encourage individual creativity in the learning process. My son is a person who needs space to pursue an idea to its end. When he asks a difficult question, he needs to be given the tools to find the answers himself. It became clear that we weren't going to find a local school that was going to give Mikhael these opportunities.

And so unexpectedly, we found ourselves looking at full-time homeschooling again -- this time for real. Nervous about the implications of our choice, my husband resisted for a long time. We interviewed at all the local schools, and even sent in a registration fee to one of them, but when it came to making the final decision, we found we couldn't send Mikhael to school.

Instead, we contacted the "Jewish Education Umbrella Group," and discovered that to become legal homeschoolers we simply had to pay a \$100 fee and to fill out a form ("Assurance of Consent for Home Instruction"). The coordinator of the Jewish group visits once or twice a year to make sure we're fulfilling our obligations under state law. No tests, no portfolio submissions. We were on our own.

### **Theme-Based Approach**

There are many approaches to homeschooling. There are the formal schoolers, who decide the material they're going to cover, and a timeframe, and develop schedules to fit it all in. Many parents new to homeschooling favor this approach, and my husband is one of them. He needs to be certain he is covering the proper material to ensure our son's smooth re-entry into school whenever that may become necessary. To that end we have drawn up a timetable with 15-minute intervals that encompasses all the state government requirements, as well as a full Jewish studies curriculum -- about 15 subjects in all. Included in the timetable are visits to the park, snacks, projects to help others, and food preparation. It's an ambitious program.

Other homeschoolers prefer a theme-based approach. They choose a topic that will occupy the child/family for a certain period, and then explore all the disciplines that intersect with the topic. For example, a music theme could include the physics of sound waves; the anatomy of the ear; history of musical expression; various ethnic music; music of the various holidays; music as it pertains to Jewish law. The advantage of a theme-based program is that it allows children to explore a subject to its end, both deeply and widely, and see the world in a holistic fashion, rather than as a series of discrete areas of knowledge.

At the other end of the spectrum are the "unschoolers," who follow the child's interests wherever they may go. These educators believe that life is full of learning opportunities, and that if we allow children to pursue answers to their own questions, they will learn everything they need to know. For unschoolers, the parents' job is to provide the stimulus, and then give children the skills they need to find answers to their questions.

### **Self Confidence**

The school year has started in our family. On the first day, my daughter went off in the carpool, while Mikhael slept in, since there was no need to wake him. But as soon as he was ready to learn, he drove us at full throttle. Not only do we cover reading and math, Bible and Jewish law, we also play tag and take bike-rides. "The best thing about homeschool," my son announced, "is that you can sit on the teacher's lap when he reads you a story." And there are lots of hugs in there, too.

By six o'clock on that first day of homeschool, my husband and I were tired, but Mikhael wanted to continue. So he and my daughter sat at the desk and did "homework" together. She is also part of his education, reading to him and correcting his arithmetic.

Twice a week my son gets together with the other homeschoolers in the area for play. This gives the homeschooling parent a regular afternoon off, and the boys have each others' company. Many people ask if I'm worried that Mikhael is going to miss the social aspects of school. I am not. All of life is about social interaction, whether in shul, at the park, in the bakery, or the library. One mother told me she decided to educate her own because, "I love the way homeschooled children interact with each other and articulate their feelings and thoughts. They never seem to have hang-ups about speaking to an adult or a 5-year-old. I'm impressed with their self confidence."

One thing I've learned from the homeschooling network is that people move in and out of educating their children this way. It's not a religion; it is a choice based on the needs of a child at a certain time and place. My husband and I have committed ourselves to teach Mikhael at home this year. After that we'll renegotiate.

Our older daughter may never be a good homeschooling candidate; she needs peer pressure to perform academically. It's a year by year, child by child decision.

The Torah gives a guideline for educating children: "And you shall teach them to your children, and you shall talk about them. When you sit in your house and when you go on your way, when you lie down and when you get up." Mikhael seems to have absorbed this message. If you ask him what his school hours are, he'll tell you: "24/7."