

## Community Voices

### *In a pandemic, our children need a moral compass more than ever*

By Bassy Landa

Back-to-School season usually means buying new backpacks, pencils, notebooks and whatever else our child's school places on the shopping list. A lot of that is happening this year too, and though reopening plans vary from county to county and from district to district, one thing is certain: we're in for a challenging new school year.

As we venture into this new reality we know education will change. All of us, parents, teachers and students, will have to be more caring, considerate, patient and generous than ever before.

Children in school will have to be more caring for their peers by wearing masks and practicing distancing measures. Teachers educating online will have to be more considerate of students who may have difficulty keeping up in this new environment. And parents will have to be extra patient with their children and more generous with their time and resources to help them acclimate, while doing so themselves as well.

As parents, we have the primary responsibility to educate our children and help them form a healthy perspective on life; it's the wonderful and daunting task we sign up for. In my position as co-director of the Chabad Jewish Center and the director of the Jewish Family Network here in St. Charles County, I've spoken to dozens and dozens of young parents who in the last months have been thrust into the world of homeschooling and home-camping. Many of their children are lacking structure, lacking friends to play with, and feeling anxious, uncertain and vulnerable. With the start of a new school year, children are once again being put into new and different circumstances, whether it's in-person classes with unfamiliar restrictions, or online schooling with teachers they've never met in person.

And I've been trying to share this message with my fellow parents: now, more than ever, our children need to be learning to care for those less fortunate, to think about what good they can bring society at large. Most importantly, they must see it in our own example. For as long as there is limited interaction with peers and mentors, it will almost entirely be up to us to ensure that our children develop this mindset. This way, when they finally return to school – or to normal schooling – they'll be able to take this spirit of generosity with them.

There's a project gaining steam that has the potential to dramatically alter our children's mindset towards generosity and thinking of others. It's called ARK, which stands for Acts of Random Kindness. Children are given a small box shaped like Noah's Ark, into which they place some money – a penny,

a nickel, any amount really – each day, to be given to a charity of their choice. It's a small act, but a consistent one, and can be a transformative one.

There's a science to it. A 2018 Berkeley study, for example, details how "people are more willing to give when they see generosity as part of who they are." It continues: "For instance, in one study, young children were more likely to help others when they had been identified as 'being a helper.'"

This is the core value of the ARK initiative: to create a culture of giving.

Inspired by the teachings of the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, of righteous memory, the project asks children to pause each day to consider others, and has seen huge success in cities around the U.S., including El Paso, Texas; Lawrence, Kansas and elsewhere.

It's hardly a secret: the coronavirus pandemic has brought out the worst in some, and the best in many more.

People with a generous mindset will go even further to be generous during a crisis. J.P. Morgan reported a 63 percent increase in charitable giving in April, when the country was in the throes of the pandemic. People with a tendency to put others first will go out of their way to protect others. A 2020 Norwegian School of Economics study found that "crisis makes respondents more willing to prioritize society's problems over their own problems." At the same time, people who are selfish on the best of days will be downright inconsiderate during the worst.

In other words, crisis brings out who we really are.

Which is why it's so important that our children develop a generous and caring mindset. Let's use this time to foster a culture of empathy and giving. Our child's routine acts of kindness can change our world for the good. Even if it begins with just a penny.

***Bassy Landa directs the Chabad Jewish Center of St. Charles County together with her husband Rabbi Chaim Landa, serving the county's Jewish population of nearly 6,000. For more information on the ARK program and to help get it started in St. Charles, visit: [www.JewishSt-Charles.org/ARK](http://www.JewishSt-Charles.org/ARK).***

