



Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students

“Family Values”
by Jack Cohen
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My name is Jasper Heinsohn Cohen, but people always call me Jack. This was done to honor my great-grandfather John (who was known as Jack). My parents also chose a name beginning with the letter “J” to honor my other great-grandfather Joseph. My middle name, Heinsohn, is my mom’s last name and Cohen is my dad’s last name. However, there is more of them in me than just their names. This essay is about my extended family and their values.

Education, or Cheenuch, is a huge value in my family. All of my grandparents went to college and graduate school, and so did my mom and my Aunts Janet and Lisa. More than a few of my relatives are teachers. I highly value education, as well, because I see the things I learn in school as the building blocks of my future and my character. Through the years my teachers and my parents have taught me to love intellectual challenges like algebra and geometry and engineering is one of the challenges I want to take on next.

As I get older, I care more about school and education. I didn’t like reading very much when I was little, but I had a lot of questions, especially about how things work. So I would ask my mom. She would answer me as best she could but always tried to get me to find out more for myself by going to the library or searching for information online. I didn’t take her advice until I was about 10, but after that I started reading more books.

A value in my family that’s important to me, as well is open-mindedness, or P’tee-choot. Trying new things and new ways of thinking are vital to building experience. When I talked to my Aunt Lisa (Dad’s sister) about values, she cited open-mindedness when talking about the trips her parents (my Grandpa Stan and Grandma Fran) took her and my dad on. Whenever they had a little extra money the family would go on a trip around Arizona, where they lived, but they also went to Los Angeles, Seattle, Miami, England and Paris, and they experienced art and theatre by going to museums and shows.

Lisa enjoyed those trips because they were fun but as an adult she now recognizes the experiences impressed on her the importance of curiosity and exploring the world, pushing beyond the familiar.

Saving money, or Chas-choot, is important because if you always spend all you have, not only will you probably get into debt but you limit your options in the future. If you spend less than you make and save some, you will have money to do things later on.

Saving money is also a very important value to my mom's parents, whom I call Granne and Gramps. A trip they made when my mom was six or seven made a deep impression on her. The vacation was a rare one because it was just for fun – no visits to relatives. The family traveled to Pittsburgh where they went to an art museum and ate at a Chinese restaurant.

This isn't a big deal for people used to New York City where there are museums and restaurants almost everywhere you look. But for my mom, the trip combined new sights, sounds, smells and tastes (she had never eaten Chinese food before). It was a rare pleasure but obviously something of importance to frugal Granne and Gramps. They were children during the Depression and modest people but they wanted to broaden their children's minds. Dinner out for family of six (Mom had two foster brothers at the time) was expensive.

Kindness, or Cheh-sed, is one of the values that I use every day, or at least try to. It is often associated with little actions such as holding open a door for someone. But it can also be about bigger issues -- such as saving lives. It takes a lot of training and skill to be a first responder, such as emergency medical technicians -- or EMTs, -- firemen and trauma-room doctors and nurses, but it can be kindness that makes people choose those professions in the first place.

My dad's cousin, Adam, is a captain in the Ft. Lauderdale Fire Department, but he spent many years as an EMT. At the funeral of his and my dad's grandmother – my great-grandmother Sophie – her family remembered and honored her for many things, but it was her kindness that they recalled most.

Widowed at a young age and having to work full-time to support herself and two children (then ages 11 and 8), Great-Grandma Sophie managed to still be extremely attentive to her children's needs. She must have done a great job at that because her daughter, my Grandma Fran, looked up to her as a role model. She remembers being about 10 years old and going to the racetrack with Grandma Sophie and winning money on a horse called Her Triumph. The money could have gone for household expenses but instead their family of three went out for a nice dinner.

In his eulogy of Sophie, my Great-Uncle Chuck (Sophie's son and Adam's father) talked about her kindness, widening it to what he called generosity of spirit. He remembers that she never complained during his childhood – a time that was probably the most difficult time of her life. Up until she died, just two months before her 100th birthday, she was as even-tempered and had as joyful an outlook on life as she always had.

Hard work, or A-vo-dah ka-shey, is a strong value in my family and we do it out of passion, discovery and pushing oneself to be better and stronger. Hard work and the drive behind it bring about great things like medical discoveries and revolutionary technology, but also better lives for our families than we had ourselves.

Charity, or Tzedakah, is an important value. The idea of tzedakah is one of the oldest tenets of Judaism and it makes me proud that my family helps those who are less fortunate than we are. My Grandma Fran records books for the blind and Granne works with her local chapter of the American Association of University Women to put on a massive, annual used-book sale, the proceeds of which fund educational programs for women. I have volunteered weekend mornings at the breakfast program of Grace Church in Jersey City.

My Gramps values politeness, or Derech Eretz, courtesy and civility, which were very important to his mother when he was growing up. While he was polite out of habit, Gramps says he called on those values a lot when he was in college and became the president of his fraternity. He took seriously the responsibility of running their big household but found that using a light touch -- being mindful of peoples' needs and upbeat about solving problems -- was often the most successful approach. In leadership positions he's held since then (township supervisor and lieutenant governor of his state chapter of the Mayflower Society) he's taken on bigger responsibilities but maintains the same respect for people and their issues.

I call on these social values in my own life. I have found that politeness, courtesy, and civility are vital in all of my relationships. Without politeness, I can offend people or embarrass them. Without courtesy and civility people won't listen to what I have to say or consider my opinion.

These are the values that are most important in my family and that they are passing on to me. Not all of them are ones I see myself having now, but I understand why they're important. Maybe someday they'll be my values as well.