

ACCOMMODATIONS FOR HIGH HOLY DAYS ABSENCES IN THE PALOS VERDES SCHOOL DISTRICT

From: Rabbi Isaac Jeret

August 2011

Dear Friends,

As we approach the High Holy Days, I write this letter to remind parents and others in our community of the strides that we have made regarding an issue that has proved challenging over the last several years. I refer to the manner in which our children's absences from school or school-related activities on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur have been addressed, in certain instances, in our local public schools. Indeed, our Superintendent of Schools, Mr. Walker Williams, has gone to great lengths to ensure that principals and their teachers throughout our district are sensitive to the needs of our children and families at this time of year.

I want to share with you, in very practical terms, the policies, procedures, and/or preferences that our local Principals and teachers will be reminded of in the coming weeks (prior to the High Holy Days). Given their commitment to the welfare of all of the children in their schools and their relationships with Mr. Williams, I have every confidence that our local educators will implement and uphold these important policies, procedures, and preferences (as they worked hard to do so last year) in accord with the way they were intended and understood during my conversations with Mr. Williams and other district-officials in the past. The foundational principle of all of the items below is as follows: *As all other children are also entitled when they are absent from school for their observance of religious occasions, our children are entitled to take the days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur off from school and to have their absence classified as excused absences (this is true for their absence due to other Jewish occasions as well). Furthermore, our schools will accommodate our children and teens reasonably, as regards making up missed learning and examinations (including quizzes).*

- Students marked absent due to a religious observance will not be declined any award or any other honor for good or perfect attendance at school (whether for a marking period, for the school-year, or any other duration), given that such absences are excused absences. This obviously applies to Jewish students as regards absences for ANY Jewish holiday upon which a Jewish child does not attend school. The High Holy Days most definitely fall into this category.
- The schools will aim not to schedule athletic meets or games, Homecoming, Graduation, prom-night or other major celebrations or events to coincide with major religious observances (the eve and first day of Rosh Hashanah and the eve and day of Yom Kippur would most definitely fall into this category, as would the eve of Passover and the eve of Shavuot). The district's existing efforts in this regard, including consultation with me, will continue.
- All teachers will be asked not to give quizzes or tests on the first day of Rosh Hashanah or on Yom Kippur. If a quiz or test is given on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, Jewish students will not be penalized due to their absences, should their parents choose for them to be absent, and it will be understood that they will need to take a make-up on another day (with efforts on the part of teachers to ensure that our children do not miss class time to do so), seeing as they will not have had opportunity to study for exams or quizzes during their absence for religious observance.

- Students absent due to any religious observance will be given a grace period to make up their school-work or homework that is the same as that which is mandated currently by district policy for those absent due to illness (or longer, if the existing policy or procedure calls for a longer grace period for absences due to religious observance). As well, teachers will be asked to avoid excessive homework assignments when *major* religious observances occur (the High Holy Days would fall into this category, as would the eve of Passover).

Mistakes will occur – even with teachers' best intentions. So, how should you proceed if your child's experience deviates from that which is noted above? In such situations, please follow the following procedures. This will ensure that the situation is properly dealt with in the most expedient manner and with best results:

1. Please talk to the teacher or coach most immediately involved in the situation that has arisen. Share your concerns as a parent. If the situation is not resolved without delay and in accordance with the understandings noted above, please continue as follows.
2. Please call me immediately in my office at (310) 377-6986. Please do not delay in contacting me. Depending upon the specific occurrence, we may approach the situation in a variety of different ways. However, I am confident that the situation will be resolved in accordance with the policies, procedures, and preferences noted above and without unreasonable delay.

One last but very important note on this matter: Many of our children may feel uncomfortable about being singled out in these situations. They may worry that teachers or fellow students may see them differently, having noted that their Jewish identity indicates a practical difference in their availability for class-work, homework, or athletics. It is normal not to want to feel different and it can feel uncomfortable to remind an authority figure (a teacher or coach or principal) or our peers of our difference (this is as much true for parents as it is for children!). Therefore, please consider the following:

1. Please remember that when an issue does arise, in most instances, the matter will be resolved with your initial conversation with the teacher or coach involved, as most of these situations are honest mistakes by well-meaning people. In fact, your successfully raising the issue with an authority figure together with your child (when appropriate for your child to be involved directly) can serve as an important opportunity for your child to learn to advocate for herself.
2. In these instances, neither children nor parents have anything at all to fear. If the issue that arose was a mistake, it will be corrected without incident. If it is anything other than a mistake, your child's best protection is an approach to resolution that is handled within the system, but involves proper documentation by me, by the school, and by the district administrators (and we would undertake these together, in the rare event that the teacher or coach is not responsive). Please take fullest advantage of my assistance and guidance in this regard. Remember, when we are quiet about any problem, it is most likely to repeat. However, our responses must be constructive and, depending upon the situation, different responses are appropriate. Please allow me to help you.
3. Lastly, as a Jew or as any other minority, we are blessed to live in a country that protects our rights to worship freely and to learn in our schools without prejudice, regardless of our religious beliefs and practices. No one in any public setting has any right to treat our religious choices any differently than any other religious choice made by any other citizen of our country. Sometimes, in life, there are principles to stand up for that might seem difficult in the moment but make us

feel stronger and prouder in the long-run for having done so. As Jewish families and as a Jewish community, let us resolve to work together to teach our children these invaluable lessons of Jewish pride and American freedom, if and when necessary, over the course of these High Holy Days.

Of course, my hope is that none of the above remedies is necessary at all. I very much look forward to seeing you at our High Holy Days Services, if not before then.

Shanah Tovah -- May you and yours be blessed with a sweet and wonderful year!

Rabbi Isaac Jeret
Spiritual Leader