



TELLING OUR STORY

*Growing as Individuals
and as a Family at the JCC*

For families, celebrating birthdays and holidays, marking milestones, carving out special time to connect and create meaningful memories together is what gives life sweetness and meaning.

The JCC is proud to play a part in helping families establish these kinds of meaningful ties – ones that keep them close and connected from infancy to adulthood, just like with the Yechezkel family.

Eyal Yechezkel and his wife, Yifat, moved to Tenafly in 2004, when their son, Tal, who is now 16, was one year old. They chose this community because they heard the JCC was a thriving, family-focused epicenter of Jewish life. Now, 15 years later, it has surpassed their every expectation and become a meaningful hub for their family.

“Our kids basically grew up at the J,” explains Eyal. “We enrolled Tal in the nursery school, and when his sisters were born, they attended as well. We loved the teachers and the cheerful classrooms and I can still remember rushing to the JCC from the city every Friday after work for the amazing Shabbat celebrations. We’d light the candles and sing songs and I think back on those happy moments as high points that profoundly shaped our life as a family.”

As the children grew, they spent their summers attending the *Neil Klatskin Day Camp* and during the school year they came to the J for basketball, dance class and, as teens, for *Israeli Scouts*.

“I came to the US from Israel as a child of 11 and grew up in Hollywood, FL,” Eyal explains. “Yifat, also grew up in Israel, and came to America in her twenties. After we married and started our family, we spoke both Hebrew and English at home so our children would be fluent in both languages. It was important to us as parents to provide exposure to both our American and Israeli life and our involvement at the JCC made this easy because it’s a place that strives to connect Israelis and Americans through programs that enrich the American Jewish experience. The *Israeli Scouts* is one example and the *Media Room* is another.

“The Media Room is an incredible program in so many ways, but most importantly, it has opened a door that has led to a very powerful bonding experience for me and my son Tal.”



Eyal & Tal at a Media Room meeting



Tal as a child at the Leonard and Sybil Rubin Early Childhood Center

The Media Room is a joint venture between the Israeli American Council (IAC), the JCC, and IDC Hertziliya that provides resources, education, and a platform for individuals of all ages to become effective advocates for Israel. Modeled on the IDC Hertziliya's "situation room," its goal is to create online communities that can be positive influencers on international public opinion regarding the State of Israel via social media platforms. Eyal and Tal signed up for the program shortly after it was launched and have been actively attending its meetings together every Wednesday night for the last 2 years.

"A weekly commitment like this was a really big thing to take on, but it's been totally worth it," says Tal. "Even though it meets in the middle of the week with school and homework and basketball practice, my dad and I never miss a meeting. We are passionate about the program's mission and it's given us a really exciting way to bond and share ideas. The program is creative and fun and we get to work as a team, creating content and building positive awareness about Israel, which is important to us."

The projects we work on together make me feel like I'm doing something significant at a young age and it's shaping me in ways I never expected - and it's shaping my relationship with my dad in amazing ways as well. We share ideas and motivate each other.

I now watch the news every morning and feel informed and able to debate and advocate for important causes. Last year, our *Media Room* cohort went to Washington Square Park to interview people about their perceptions of Israel and I gained a lot of interesting insights. I am so grateful to be sharing this kind of time with my dad. It's time I'll always value and remember."

Eyal feels exactly the same way and credits the JCC for providing programs that keep families like his seamlessly connected and engaged from the earliest years until the time the children transition to college and adulthood.

“Parenting is an amazing journey and the JCC has been part of ours every step of the way. Our family experience is strongly intertwined with the J and it has added a great dimension to our family life. Each week, when Tal and I drive home from our weekly meeting in the Media Room, I'm filled with pride. I witness how his awareness and passion grow and I can honestly say that I learn as much from him and the other kids as they learn from me. If it wasn't for this program, we might just be home watching TV. Instead, we're out making a difference together and it is genuinely life-shaping.”

The JCC journey for the Yechezkel family continues. Tal spent part of this summer as a counselor for *Big Idea*, the JCC's high tech *Neil Klatskin Specialty Camp*. And this fall, he is taking the reins as the Director of Media for the *Media Room*. His sisters will continue to participate in *Israeli Scouts*, and look forward to joining their dad in the *Media Room* when they are old enough. And Yifat is also looking forward to playing on one of the JCC's *Mamanet* teams.

Eyal loves reminiscing over his children's childhood as he walks the halls. "Every time I enter the doors of the J these days and see all the young kids roaming the building to take part in all the many things they can enjoy and study here, it takes me back. I suddenly see Tal at that age again - with his whole childhood still ahead of him - walking these same halls, eager to swim and play basketball and meet up with his friends. And it makes me smile, because I picture the next generation following in our footsteps, building their own memories and family traditions at the JCC."