



THE BLOGS

Stefanie Weisman

FEATURED POST

4 things to do before heading off to college

You can make the transition meaningful if you don't get lost in the textbooks and bed sheet sizes



Illustrative: Moving out. (iStock)

Across the country, millions of teens are getting ready to leave the only home they've ever known and head off to college. All too often, this momentous occasion is overshadowed by mundane activities such as buying textbooks and choosing bedsheets, and before they know it, they've started a new phase of their life with barely a goodbye to Mom and Dad.

But many teens and parents are looking for something more during this transitional period. Recently, a 2017 Bronfman fellow who is starting college in the fall posted on our intergenerational listserv: "It's so easy to let such experiences pass by in a blur and to suddenly find ourselves in a new place without having been present and intentional. . . ." The young man asked the members of the listserv, who range in age from 18 to 48, for "tips and rituals . . . to make the transition meaningful and enrich the journey."

This post resulted in an outpouring of responses from our tight-knit community of Jewish leaders. Since their suggestions are helpful to anyone who is leaving home and heading off to college — or, indeed, anyone who is going through a period of transition — we wanted to share them here.

Using Jewish Ritual

Many people described how Jewish ritual could come into play during the move from home to college. One rabbi suggested hosting an open-house *seudah shlishit* for friends and family during Shabbat, to help departing teens relax and connect with loved ones before the Big Step. Others mentioned the tradition of *shaliach mitzvah*, in which a person going on a journey receives money — often just a symbolic amount like a dollar — to give to a person in need when they reach their destination. The money reminds those departing of the kindness of those back home, and gives them a sense of comfort as they move forward. Families could also recite a private prayer before the teenager leaves home. One young woman who is currently in college said that she likes saying *Tefillat Haderech*, the Traveler's Prayer, at the beginning of major trips.

A few mentioned the tradition of sitting silently before a long journey, which encourages the traveler to reflect and savor the last few moments in his or her old home. [Dara Horn](#), a Bronfman alumna and author, noted that this tradition “is preserved in my husband’s Holocaust-survivor family, where they also add the words ‘*mazl, glik, bracha, hatzlacha*’ repeated three times (luck, fortune, blessing, success), followed by ‘*forn gezunt un kumen gezunt*’ repeated three times (go in health and arrive in health). The words are idiosyncratic to his family as far as I can tell, but sitting silently before a big trip was very standard among pre-Holocaust Eastern European Jews (it appears in many Yiddish films) and is still quite common among Eastern Europeans today.”

Make Time for Family

Many people stressed the importance of spending quality time with family before the transition. One woman, whose 18-year-old is about to leave home, decided to take a two-week, technology-free trip with her family before her child moved out. She advised those going off to college to “talk to your parents and create a shared ritual with them. Whether or not they have expressed this to you, this transition is monumental for them (possibly even more than for you).”

Communicate with Loved Ones

People of all ages noted the value of personalized, hand-written notes in this era of social media and text messages. Parents and teens could write each other letters before moving day, to be opened when the college student has settled into his or her new place. Our alumni also emphasized keeping the lines of communication open after the school year has started. One young woman suggested having a weekly check-in with a friend or family member. Although she was initially afraid that this would hold her back while starting college, it actually gave her a foundation on which to grow.

Find What You Like to Do, and Be Kind to Yourself

A number of people advised college students to find a creative outlet, like writing in a journal. Writing as little as a sentence a day can help give meaning and clarity to the moments that shape you. One person mentioned that cleaning her dorm room before Shabbat gave her a wonderful sense of routine. Many also stressed the importance of getting enough sleep in their new environment: “Give yourself permission to rest.” College students should explore their new home, make time for fun activities, and have things that comfort them at the ready: teddy bears, Tanakh, running shoes, flowers, etc.

Life is full of endless transitions, one of our alumni noted, and each stage of life is equally special. Adding ritual — whether it be religious, cultural, personal, or other — helps us grow and gives us comfort, enhancing our ability to be truly present. If your child is heading off to college, or if you’re going through any life change, we hope you take time to reflect on what the moment means to you.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stefanie Weisman is the Communications & Design Associate for The Bronfman Fellowship, a vibrant network of 1,200+ young Jews from Israel and North America that includes some of today’s most inspiring Jewish writers, thinkers, and leaders.