

THOSE GRADUATION AWARDS

How extraordinary are you?

CHANA KORNFELD

Dear Esther, I just finished the slew of end-of-year graduations and ceremonies, where we were fortunate to celebrate our daughter's successful completion of high school. We attended her graduation full of pride and gratitude. Our child made it to the finish line! We dressed up smartly, ensured all the other children were tucked in and crisply clean, and drilled them on proper graduation etiquette. (No running, squealing, or eating the refreshments before they are served.) We invited grandparents and close friends, and we arrived a few minutes early to secure seats close enough to the stage to clearly see our daughter. Then we leaned back, relaxed, and got ready to enjoy the show. But, alas, it was hard to. We listened to long (and poorly delivered) speeches from valedictorians and salutatorians and longer speeches from teachers and principals about those valedictorians and

salutatorians. But hey, I thought to myself, they did kill themselves for four years to earn the distinct honor of boring a crowd of disinterested parents, waiting to see their daughters called up to the podium.

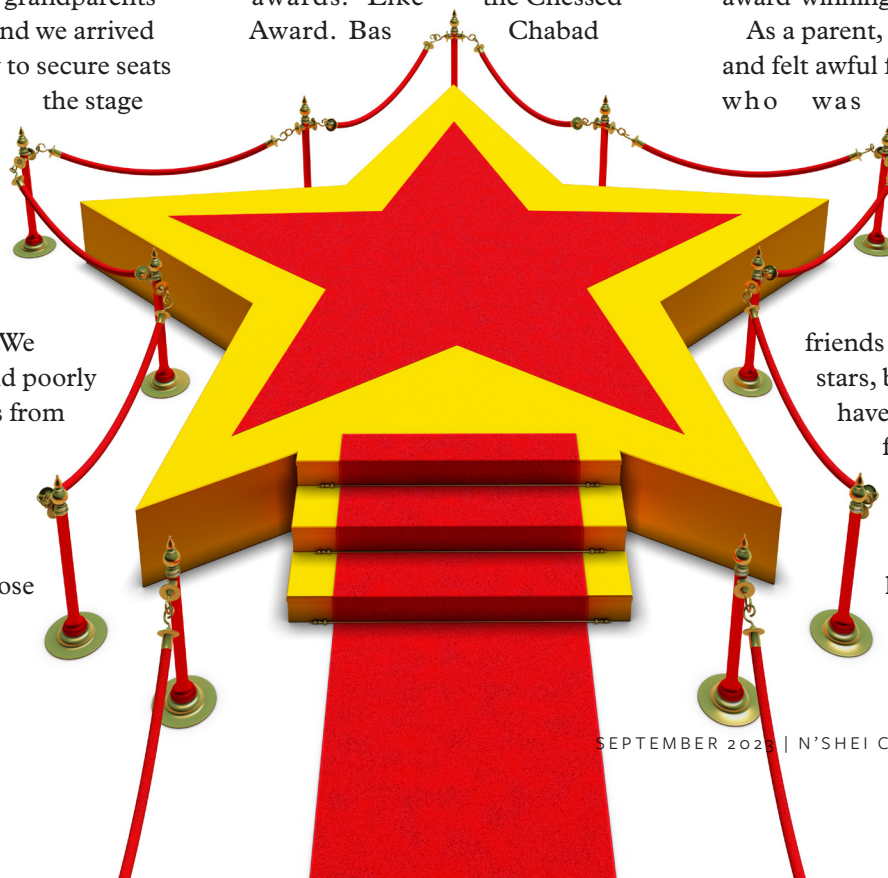
Then came the awards. The principal began the awards ceremony by reminding the room that all the students who were graduating are stars and deserving of awards. But of course, the crowd understood, some students are bigger stars. And more deserving of awards. Like the Chessed Award. Bas Chabad

Award. Spirit Award, Tznius Award, Dugma Chaya Award, Middos Award, Ahavas Yisroel Award, Effort Award. There were more, but I can't remember them all.

Of course, each award presentation was prefaced by a eulogy-like speech, listing all the various virtues of the award-winner.

After all was said and done, half the graduating class was recognized some way or another and half the class just sat on the stage politely clapping for their extraordinary, award-winning classmates.

As a parent, I sat in the crowd and felt awful for my daughter who was sitting on her graduation stage to be publicly labeled as "non-spectacular." She graciously cheered on her friends who were deemed stars, but I know it must have felt awful to have friends and family watching as half the class was recognized and honored, and she was overlooked,



just your ordinary girl, or worse, the bottom half of the class.

Esther, this practice needs to be reconsidered. It is not fair to students or their families to turn a hard-earned graduation that should be celebrating and recognizing every graduate into an opportunity for principals and teachers to publicly choose their favorites and read love letters to them in front of a crowd.

Signed,

A Momma Bear Who Cares and Dares to Bare Her Soul and Share!

Dear Momma,

I attended a few graduations this year as well and had similar thoughts and when I received your letter, I thought long and hard about awards and the message we are sending our children.

I am going to make a distinction between objective awards and subjective awards. Objective awards like valedictorian are measurable and do not require anyone's personal opinion. The grades are calculated and the student with the highest average wins, like her or not. Everyone understands it is a numbers game, not a popularity vote. Everyone understands that only one person can have the highest average.

Even where it is something of a popularity vote (subjective awards), I do give teachers and principals enough credit to believe they do not simply choose their favorites, they make their best effort to

objectively choose the student they determine to be most deserving of the award based on years of interactions and observations.

Still, subjective awards like the Middos Award rely solely on others' judgment and opinion and so when a student gets the award or is denied the award, they get the message that someone did or did not think highly of them. Also, *middos* awards cannot be quantified, so how can a school honestly proclaim one student to have "the most *middos*"?

Is this a good parting message for our students? Let me tell you what we think of you and how we would judge you if we were sitting in the heavenly tribunal.

Schools have spent 12 years educating girls in the ways of Torah, having them internalize lessons like, "Don't judge another until you are in his shoes," and, "Man sees what is visible, but G-d sees the heart," and, "Embarrassing someone is like killing him."

Yet, as they sit on the stage as graduates from these Torah institutions, they are delivered messages of utter hypocrisy. We will judge you based on what is visible to our eyes, in public, even if it embarrasses you or others.

I agree, graduation awards need to be reconsidered.

If you want to recognize students for certain achievements, that's fine. A student either achieved it or didn't. If the school wants to give out Chessed awards to all the students who dedicated over 600 hours of Chessed that year, that is a wonderful thing to recognize

and celebrate. It is also something anyone can achieve if they wish to. If the school wants to give a *davening* award to students who consistently show up on time in the morning, that's great too. They either did or did not. These would be awards that encourage and celebrate positive and measurable behaviors.

Middos Awards and Bas Chabad Awards don't encourage anyone to do anything other than to feel bad and say, well, I'm not like her.

I would love to challenge schools to think of ways to motivate and celebrate their students in all areas of goodness and kindness, but not at the expense of goodness and kindness.

Let's leave the judging of hearts to Hashem and do our job of educating our children with sensitivity and compassion.

Every graduating student should feel proud on her graduation stage.

Signed,

Esther Etiquette



Chana Kornfeld, the creator and writer of Esther Etiquette (arguably our most popular column since its inception in

2011), lives in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, but was raised in Atlanta, Georgia, below the Mason-Dixon line, where good manners are taken as seriously as fried food. Chana was raised by parents and grandparents who taught her that derech erez kadmah laTorah: First, be a mentsch.