Nº22 / SPRING 2018

THINK

THE LOLA STEIN INSTITUTE JOURNAL

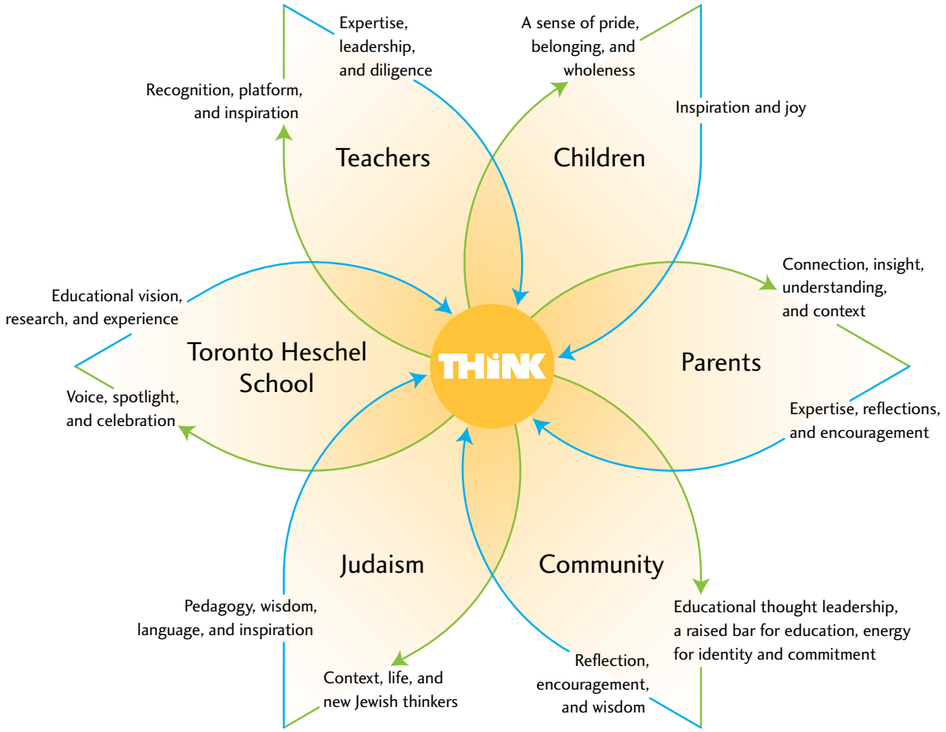
Conversation about Education, Ethics, and Our Children

COVENANT AND COMMITMENT

TENDING A GARDEN / LIVING HEBREW / DEEP THINKING AS A PRACTISED SKILL / JUDITH LEITNER COMMITS TO BEAUTY; AJ HESCHEL BUILDS LIFE AS A WORK OF ART / JOE KANOFSKY ON MISSION CREEP / JASMINE ELIAV ON SHOWING UP

The THiNK Ecosystem

This flower names what **THINK gives** to parents, the community, Judaism, The Toronto Heschel School, teachers, and children, and what **THINK receives** from them in return.



THiNK THE LOLA STEIN INSTITUTE JOURNAL

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Lola Stein z"l was an early female pharmacist in South Africa, but her special talent was in hospitality and friendship. She cared for family and friends, at home and abroad, individually, uniquely, and lovingly. We honour her memory in a way that also reaches out to many. We lovingly remember Mannie Stein z"l whose enthusiasm and support for our work with children is gratefully acknowledged.

Integrated Jewish Studies espoused by The Lola Stein Institute are delivered at The Toronto Heschel School, a Jewish day school in Toronto, Canada.

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LSI PUBLICATIONS

The Ark of the Covenant is a generous metaphor…for the journey in 2018, children need an Ark that protects their values. Thoughtful education can build that Ark.

Specifications for the Ark of the Covenant Today

Wandering 40 years in the desert, the Israelites carried an ornamented covered box with poles for handles, which never came off. It was the Ark of the Covenant, and inside were the stone tablets that Moses brought down from Mount Sinai. Chapter 37 of the Book of Exodus details the Ark's measurements, construction, and ornamentation, setting concise rules of engagement as the Israelites shouldered their responsibilities. The Ark of the Covenant is a generous and generative metaphor for us today.

Legal covenants are contractual—reciprocal pledges for a common purpose. In a nutshell, God promised, initially to Abraham and Sarah, a land of milk, honey, and prosperity. Keeping the promise, God brought the Israelites out of Egypt and sought in return their promise to embrace God-given laws and revelations. Both God and Israel wanted growing families, who would live well together, be devoted and wise.

The engravings prove not to be the sole descriptors of this Covenant of the Jews. The Ten Commandments form the foundational laws on the one side, while on the other, through its required shape, decoration, and transport readiness, the box becomes the foundational modus operandi. How we act to protect our values and sustain our mission is as critical to our relationship to God as are our laws and identity.

The words on our tablets are the values that we trust to guide us; they are verily engraved on our hearts and minds. To include them on our aspirational journey, we box our values in a lifestyle with specific dimensions that safeguard our progress and keep us on task. We structure our lives with school years, occupations, pursuits, and family units; the parameters define how much or how little our lives will encompass. On the Ark, golden cherubim signified God's presence; we also adorn ourselves with meaningful symbols and declare our worth with titles, certificates, degrees, and brands. We understand that as we wend our way, like the Israelites, we have to handle the weight of our responsibilities ourselves, staying nimble and travel-ready.

So many questions arise. Thousands of years after Mount Sinai—with no box, cherubim, handles, or journey to keep us on mission—how do we stay centred? How do we make choices that will see us uphold our commitments and enhance our standards and ethics? How do we integrate our values with changing responsibilities and modern engagements? What Ark do we build? Stuck with the freedom and the frailty of free will, what do we teach our children?

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel alludes to the power of perception; we have to protect our capacity to understand: "The higher goal of spiritual living is not to amass a wealth of information, but to face sacred moments... A moment of insight is a fortune, transporting us beyond the confines of measured time."[1]

The attention economy, where we all live, appraises resources and wealth by how much notice they attract. Sadly, truth and commitment are not system-wide priorities. Peer pressure and speedy response pervade to such an extent that decision-making is becoming a skill-based art form and commitment a mirage. The fog over accuracy clears only for unverified opinions and encouragement to accept that popularity charts the right course—500 "friends" don't like this. The attention economy makes money from indecision and shifting choices, and welcomes all to feel comfortable about repeatedly changing our minds.

There is a weighty double onus on us to keep the attention grabbers—Facebook, Google, etc.—ethical and responsible and to safeguard the personal capacity for thoughtful choice. We must educate children in the habit of heart and mind that is conscious, intentional, critical thinking. It involves re-examining how decisions are being made and how our children are learning to make choices and keep their word. These are specifications for the Ark today.

For the journey in 2018, children need an Ark that protects their values. Thoughtful education can build that Ark. It must structure presence of mind, beautify a child's independence and uniqueness, and balance equations for individuality and collective responsibilities. It must be a transportable adaptive mindset, resistant and self-reliant. Rabbi Heschel wrote, "The solution of mankind's most vexing problem will not be found in renouncing technical civilization, but in attaining some degree of independence of it."[2] Good decisions are made when we are aware of their implications and accept to stand by them; it's time to fortify our Jewish values proposition with determination and construct for our children the Ark they need today.

In this issue,

THINK writers explore commitment and the educational training that supports children to become strong deep thinkers. In Awe and Wonder, Greg Beiles presents specific techniques that he and his teachers use to teach deep thinking skills; he is concise but the implications are huge. One essential skill that children need on their journey is to feel at ease in cogent and thoughtful self-expression; for 22 years, Judith Leitner has mentored just that, as her photo essay reveals. Edna Sharet describes the miracles that emanate from commitment; profound cultural and spiritual Jewish learning blossoms through Hebrew language fluency. Lisa Rendely finds a similar flowering of meaning and impact in the school garden, where responsibility and routine sprout myriad rewards. Commitment helps the whole child meet the whole school.

Education, like covenant, is reciprocal and personal. Dvora Goodman outlines a pilot project, in the Learning Centre, where teachers are taking stock of how they actually deliver their lessons and how their students actually receive them; Toronto Heschel School teachers are working with the Desautels Self-Development Lab at the Rotman School of Management in this very personal albeit video- and computer-assisted reflection. Jasmine Eliav centres a similar spotlight on parents, who are either on or off mission as they role model to their children with every word they utter. Rabbi Joe Kanofsky also looks at consequences through *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics* by Mark Lilla. Unintended results can occur when a journey splinters into many paths that are seemingly going the same way; the Jewish community might learn from this.

Let's guard our intentions. Let's craft and carry Arks that protect what we cherish. And let's see our children do it better than us.

Pam

1 Rabbi A.J. Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), p. 6.

2 Ibid., p. 28.

Commitment to Deep Thinking

These seven practices prepare students for a wondrous future.

BY GREG BEILES

The biblical account of the creation of the world begins with depth: "When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was a tumult and a tumble, and *the spirit of God hovered above the face of the deep*" (Genesis 1:1–2).

Those who dismiss the biblical account—*how could the world be created in seven days*?—read this text superficially, ignoring its appeal to depth. The first chapter of Genesis is structured in layers; each day of creation is an iteration adding to and enriching what comes before it—like a painting that begins in simple shades of "dark and light" and develops to become a vibrant, full-colour work of art. Genesis commits us, in multiple ways, to think deeply.

In his acclaimed book, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, Nicholas Carr describes the Internet as the latest evidence of Marshall McLuhan's adage "The medium is the message." Carr writes:

> Whether I'm online or not, my mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles. Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski.[1]

With its ability to hyperlink information, the Internet offers an easy and vast sea of data. Unfortunately, without deep thinking, the knowledge that it delivers up is random, meaningless. Innovation and discovery rarely come from skimming, sampling, and collating; the face of creation relates to the deep.

Other than the practice of safe surfing—heads up for sharks and phishing—we educators need not allocate precious teaching time showing our students how to use the Internet. Born into the medium, they swim in it better than we do. But, how to think in the depths is another matter. Partly because deep thinking swims against the current, and partly because it involves techniques that are not self-evident, navigating deep waters well requires real skill.

My commitment, as a teacher and school leader, is to enable and empower students and teachers to think deeply; my tool kit for doing this contains seven techniques and practices.

1. Being in the Question

Deep thinking means engagement with dilemmas that are complex and have no immediate solutions; the deep thinker needs first to feel okay *being in the question*. Biblical creation begins with *Tohu Vavohu*—tumble, tumult, chaos, messiness. Deep thinkers live with cognitive dissonance and learn to work steadily through a problem; students must tolerate the discomfort of not knowing and hold open the questions that have no answers. Learning to *be in the question* requires open-ended inquiry, compound multi-stage problems, and project-based activities. Mindfulness practices—meditation or prayer—provide contemplation and wonder without immediate resolution.

2. Iteration

The Genesis text continues, "and there was evening and there was morning." Again and again it cycles back to the same thought. Iterative thinking also returns repeatedly to the same question, but at increasingly deeper levels. It assumes that solutions achieved are provisional, and that even better solutions await discovery. Each year, the Jewish calendar returns us to familiar moments—Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Chanukah, Purim, Pesach, Shavuot. Each time we revisit, we learn something new and go deeper.

3. Revision

Connected to iteration is the willingness to revise. Revisiting and revising one's work is a key practice in deep thinking; each revision makes a story, essay, or mathematic solution more elegant. There is tremendous value in using an eraser (or the delete key), in rewriting a paragraph, and composing two, three, or even four drafts to achieve a better outcome. The ethical version of this skill is the rabbinic concept of *Teshuva*, which means to reflect on and revise one's actions.

4. Experimentation

Deep thinkers explore and test the sustainability of their ideas. Experiments lie at the root of the Scientific Method, which renders many of humanity's greatest insights. What makes the Scientific Method credible is the process of trial and error, with the possibility, even probability, that an experiment will not support a hypothesis. "Mistakes" or "errors" can signal that thinking is reaching a new frontier.

5. Introspection and Dialogue

Self-knowledge is essential to deep thinking, in terms of a capacity to acknowledge and screen out one's biases, assumptions, and beliefs. The mindset includes skill to focus, concentrate, and regulate one's impulses. The complement to this self-awareness is the ability to engage in honest dialogue with others, to register alternative points of view and to learn from difference.

6. Thinking in the Disciplines

Deep thinkers learn to view problems through different frameworks and appreciate the filtering of various lenses. This is the true value of learning the diverse ways of thinking, which come to learners, in school tradition, as "academic disciplines" and "subjects," such as science, math, writing, ethics, and so on. Deep thinkers regard academic disciplines as ways of thinking, not storehouses of information. The Internet can tell us that the universe is 14 billion years old and was created with a Big Bang; deeper learning shares the evidence that scientists used to develop the explanation; deeper yet is to understand how the evidence was discovered by the Scientific Method; and still more profound is to practise the Scientific Method oneself and internalize the system.

7. Awe and Wonder

Rabbi A.J. Heschel reminds us, "Wonder, not doubt, is the beginning of knowledge." Wonder is the amazement that drives the desire for complex knowledge and far-reaching comprehension. It is not a feeling that can be assuaged by googling for an answer; wonder is a constant openness to the depths of what remains mysterious.

Like the seven days of creation, these seven practices prepare students for a deep and wondrous future. To solve important problems and create the next wave of innovation, we must all remain willing to go deeper. Albert Einstein is credited with saying, "No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it."

Today, as knowledge swims in shallow waters, commitment among educators to deep thinking is paramount. Like the biblical Nachshon ben Aminadav, educators must be willing to wade out from the shores of rote learning and superficial curricula. Teachers must have faith in their own experience of the depths to help children explore their own deep thinking and realize their full potential. We must remember that children can swim in the deep end of learning. Moses called for the waters of the Reed Sea to part so the Israelites could move forward, but the miracle happened and the path opened only when Nachshon went into the deep.

1 Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), p. 7.

Greg Beiles is the Head of The Toronto Heschel School and the Director of The Lola Stein Institute.

Good Books

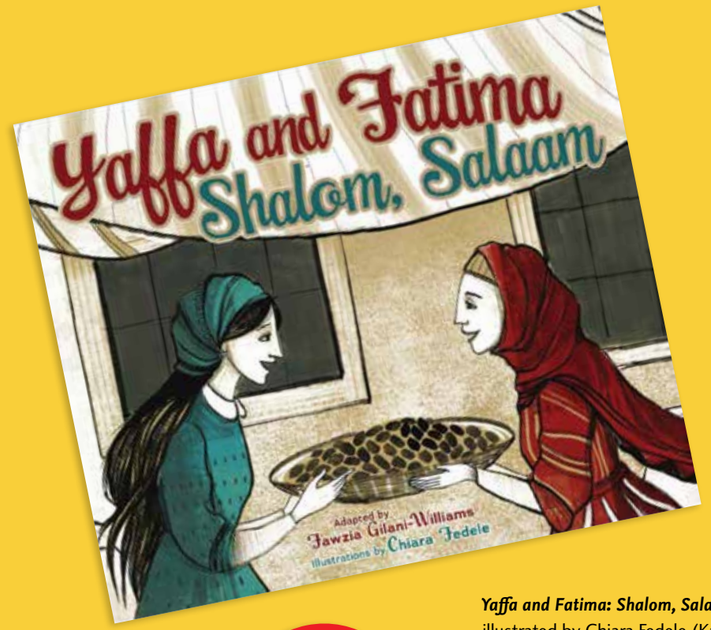
by Gail Baker & Tziporah Cohen

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHILDREN AND THE PEOPLE WHO LOVE THEM

Gail Baker is a renowned educator, a mother, and grandmother. In 1996 she co-founded The Toronto Heschel School and retired as Head of School in 2014.

Tziporah Cohen is a psychiatrist with an M.A. in Fine Arts in Writing for Children and Young Adults and is a Toronto Heschel mom.

THINK WELCOMES TZIPORAH COHEN TO GOOD BOOKS! SHALOM TZIPPY!

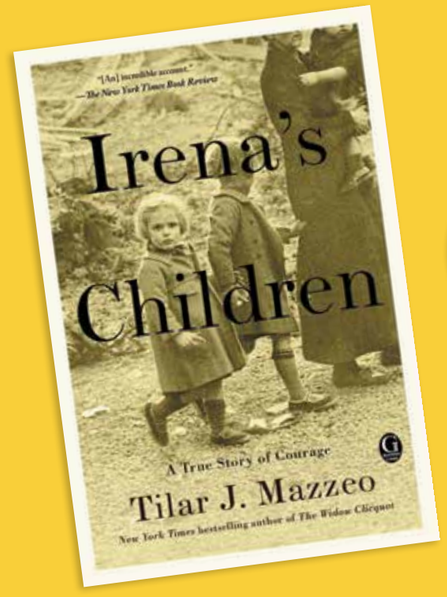


AGES 4–9

Yaffa and Fatima: Shalom, Salaam by Fawzia Gilani-Williams and illustrated by Chiara Fedele (Kar Ben Publishing, 2017)
This retelling of a traditional tale is a sweet and important story of two friends—one Jewish, one Muslim—each committed to their faith. When their neighbouring date groves fall on difficult times, Yaffa and Fatima's friendship is sustained by their faith in God and in each other. The use of colour in simple but beautiful illustrations brilliantly conveys how one can remain committed to one's religion while sharing deep friendship with someone of a different faith.

AGES 8–12

A Boy Named Queen by Sara Cassidy (Groundwood Books, 2016)
Evelyn is the only student in her Grade 5 class to befriend the new boy, Queen, who sports long wavy hair and brings Brussels sprouts and quinoa burritos for lunch. When Evelyn is the only one invited to Queen's birthday party, she must decide whether to endure the teasing of her classmates and stay true to her new friend or to walk away. This short novel (only 77 pages) is a beautifully written testament to friendship, acceptance, and being open to learning about others and oneself.



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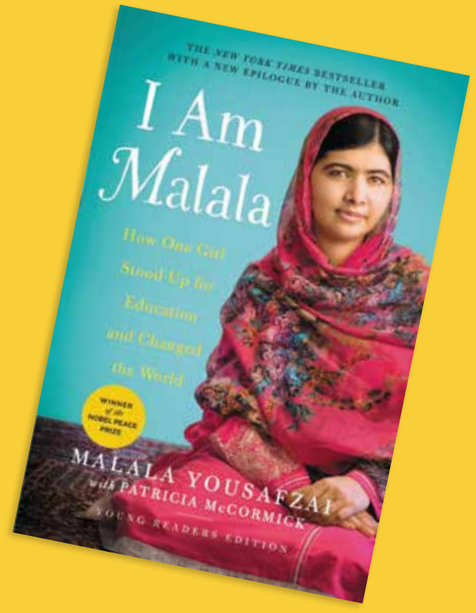


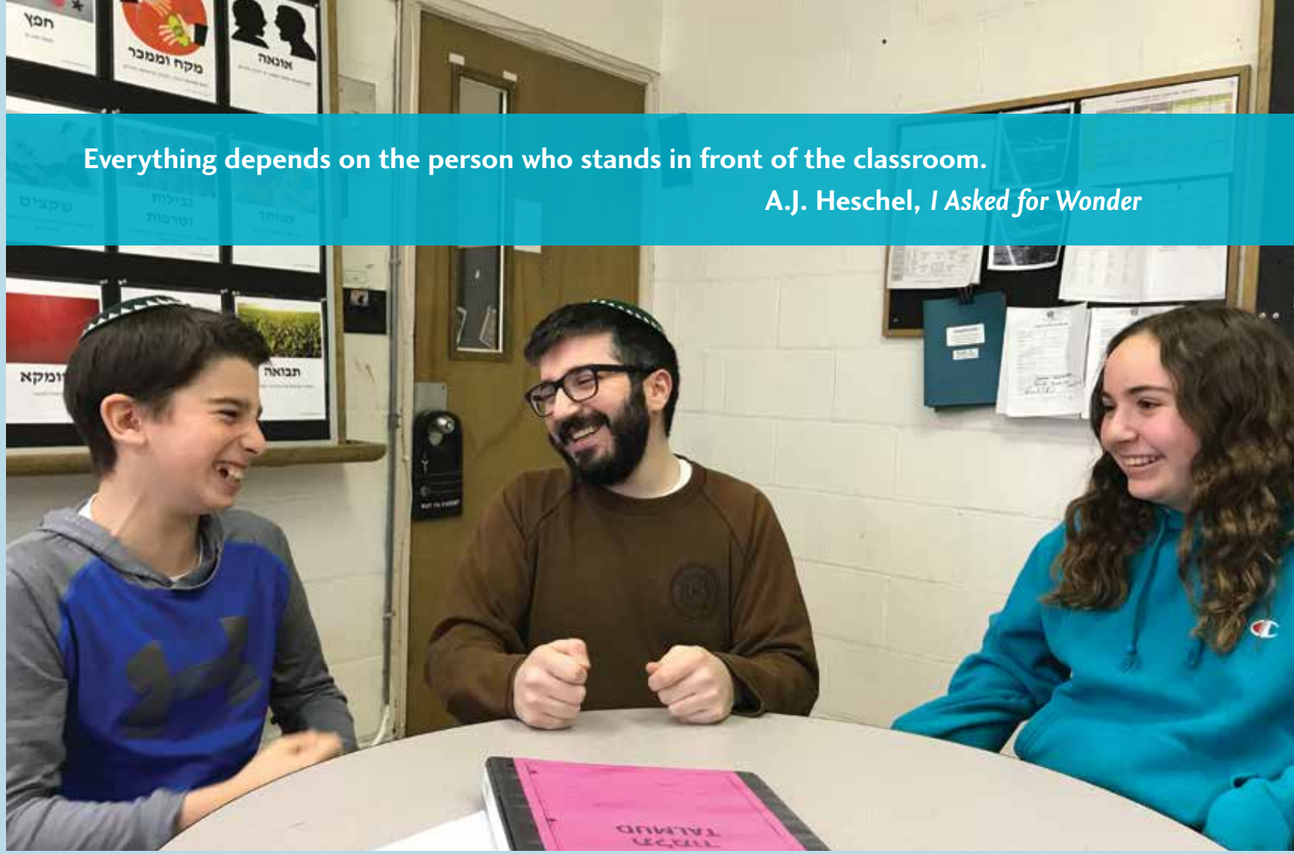
Irena's Children: A True Story of Courage (Young Readers Edition) by Tilar J. Mazzeo, adapted by Mary Cronk Farrel (Margaret K. McElderry Books, 2017)
A courageous young Polish Catholic social worker, Irena Sendler, was committed to her ideals. During the Second World War she and her team rescued almost 2,500 Jewish children from certain death. Smuggling them out of the Warsaw Ghetto in coffins and tool boxes, Sendler also made sure their names were recorded so they could find their parents after the war. This is the story of a hero, though Irena did not see herself that way. She said, "Heroes do extraordinary things; I only did what was normal."

I Am Malala: How One Girl Stood Up For Education and Changed the World by Malala Yousafzai with Patricia McCormick (Little Brown Books for Young Readers, 2014)
This young reader's edition of Malala Yousafzai's original memoir is also about her father, Ziauddin Yousafzai, and his commitment to the education of girls. Inheriting her father's love of learning and his unwavering sense of justice, young Malala advocated for the right of girls to go to school. Shot by the Taliban at age 15, she recovered and continued her father's fight, working to advance education for girls everywhere. Malala was rewarded with the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014 at the young age of 17.

The Desautels Self-Development Lab at the Rotman School of Management and The Toronto Heschel School are partners in teacher training.

Between Teacher and Student there Is a Dialogical Space

BY DVORA GOODMAN



Everything depends on the person who stands in front of the classroom.
A.J. Heschel, *I Asked for Wonder*

With schoolchildren of my own, I am reminded constantly of how important a teacher is in the learning experience of their students. If, as Heschel says, the teacher is the text that students study, what exactly are they reading? What do they take away from interactions with the text (person)? Also what does the teacher think that they take away? What learning is happening that is unintended?

Researching material for the last issue of THINK magazine, we discovered a groundbreaking possibility for thinking about personal interactions between teachers and students. Professor Mihnea Moldoveanu of the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto looks at personal interactions through what he calls the "dialogical space." Much more than a teacher's words or the knowledge content of a lesson, the dialogical space encompasses the teacher's full presence and emotional bearing, oral expression, and body language, what's happening in the immediate environment, and how the student is responding. The space houses the functioning relationship between teacher and student, the upshot of complex communications that happen all day long. How educationally strategic would it be for teachers to perfect their performance in this dialogical space?

Professor Moldoveanu is the Director of the Desautels Centre for Integrative Thinking and has been working on performance analysis in business, a completely different context than ours. At the Desautels Centre, MBA students and consulting executives are videotaped while they give presentations or lead group meetings. Later, they receive detailed feedback with insight into their performance in the dialogical space. First, a computer evaluates them using sophisticated technology that reads facial expressions and body language, then it tracks the expressions and gestures to a printed text of the presenters' words and the audience's response. The combined information is interpreted and shared with the presenters during reflective sessions with specially trained Desautels "feedback-givers." The process helps the Rotman students and executives improve their performances.

Professor Moldoveanu has done research that demonstrates the critical role "feedback" plays in learning. He explains that developmental feedback (an evaluative process where learners are helped over time to improve) is more effective than evaluative feedback (a single response that is limited to assessment). This is especially true with interpersonal skill and communication technique which are subtle and hard to measure. As such the feedback sessions are a training process and not a single happening.

In a pilot leadership initiative, the Desautels Centre for Integrative Thinking and The Lola Stein Institute are applying these techniques to elementary and junior high school teachers, and the Desautels Self-Development Laboratory (SDL) is training teachers at The Toronto Heschel School. Heschel teachers will be videotaped in their classrooms; the tapes will be analyzed at Rotman using SDL technology; and Professor Moldoveanu and his staff from the SDL will provide feedback to the teachers over several reflective sessions. We will be documenting the process and examining how studying the dialogical space between teachers and students impacts the learning experience.

This training advances the Heschel teachers' current reflective practice through scientific analysis. Bringing a camera into the classroom to record the goings-on breaks new ground. While a little challenging for the teachers, it's also very exciting. Greg Beiles, Director of The Lola Stein Institute and Head of School at Toronto Heschel, was videotaped in August as he led a professional development workshop in front of his teaching staff. He was evaluated in September. He says that the computer analysis was fascinating and the evaluation made him "reflect on the alignment of his technique and his intention." It led him to "revisit the teaching intention that he thought he had in place." The evaluation was concrete and specific and he learned a lot about how he presented to and was received by his audience.

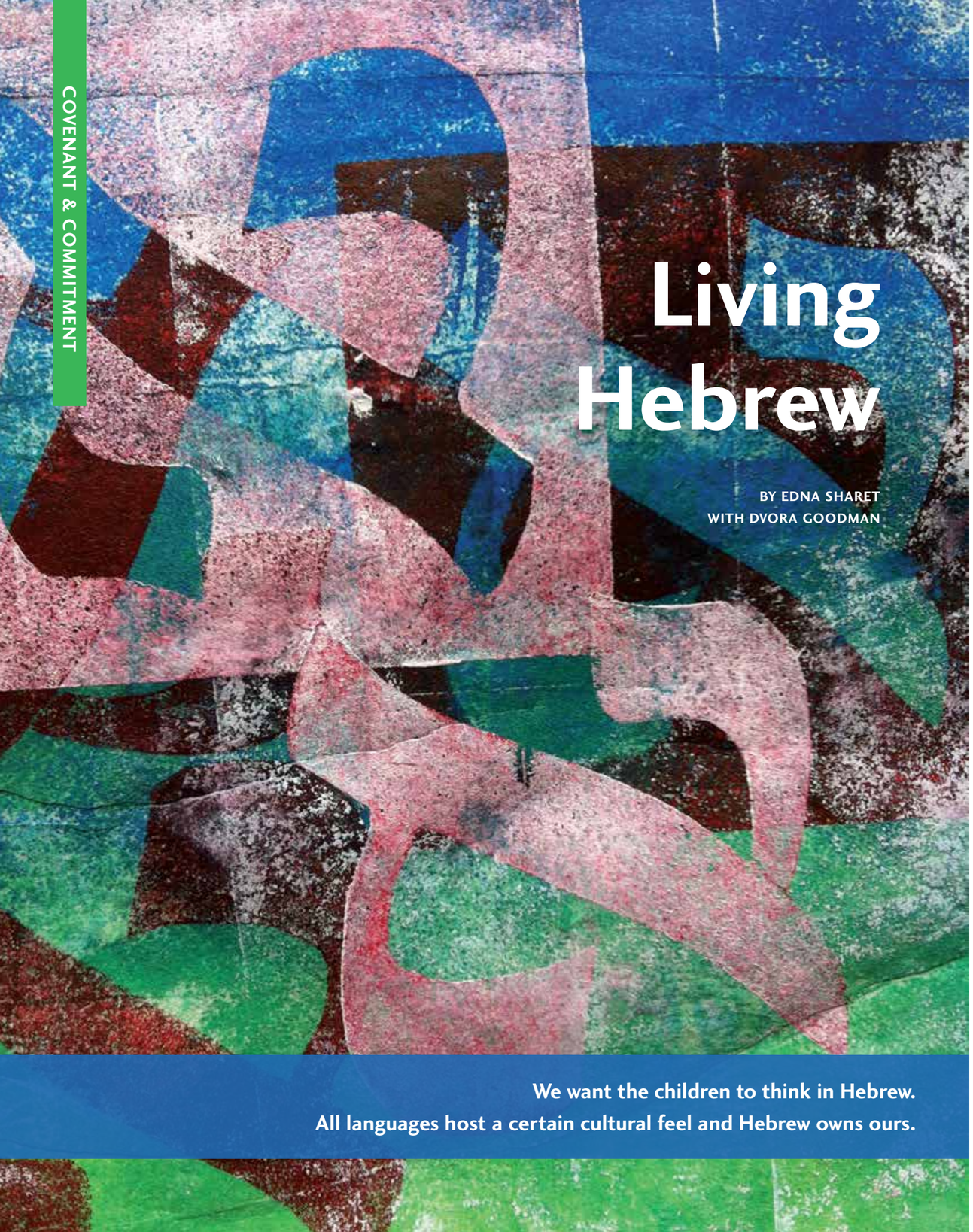
Videotaping offers teachers a mirror onto their own teaching. They can see how, in fact, they are relating to their students as they move about the classroom. They will see for themselves what's going on. They will watch themselves, and see their students watching them. They'll find out how the computer reads their expressions and movements: Does this habit add or detract from my teaching? Am I clear? Am I boring? Look how students turn away as I speak in different ways? What is that emotion? Why for that material? What is actually coming across?

Already excitement for the project is palpable. Whether with trepidation or enthusiasm, teachers have scheduled their own learning adventure. Just being tuned into the idea of the dialogical space has created a refreshed sensitivity and self-awareness. The interaction between teachers and students is under the microscope. We will keep you posted.

Dvora Goodman is the Coordinator of The Lola Stein Institute. She has worked for over 20 years in a variety of Jewish educational settings. She is also a parent of three Toronto Heschel School students.

SPECIAL FEATURE

Covenant & Commitment



Living Hebrew

BY EDNA SHARET
WITH DVORA GOODMAN

We want the children to think in Hebrew.
All languages host a certain cultural feel and Hebrew owns ours.

Hebrew is integral to our Jewish character. As a language, culture, and presence, it flows from the text that we study, the history we remember, and the ritual we practise. It is the rhythm of Judaism and the bridge that connects Jews worldwide. This premise that Hebrew is the expression of the Jewish people—verbally, culturally, spiritually, intellectually—drives The Toronto Heschel School approach to Jewish education. I have seen the strength it delivers to our students' sense of self and I am personally proud of their success in Hebrew fluency and literacy; they think and speak in Hebrew.

Imagine this interaction between a Hebrew teacher and a four-year-old child during the first week of school: The teacher crouches and, looking him in the eyes, speaks with him in Hebrew. The child has never before heard the language. He does not understand the words, but comprehends his teacher's body language and tone of voice; he sees what she points to as she speaks, realizing that she is asking him to throw the ball to her.

The challenge for teachers to speak exclusively in Hebrew to young students is not small; at first, the language divide feels like a barrier to their personal relationship. But it's not. It's nothing more than what we do at home with our babies who learn to talk through constant exposure and repeated practise. When teachers persist in Hebrew, success is abundant.

From day one Toronto Heschel Judaic teachers speak with their students exclusively in Hebrew. Proficiency depends on getting the language "into their ears and onto their tongues." The children first gather an understanding of the oral communication, then they begin to speak it themselves, and later they learn to read and write.

The teachers do not translate into English; it would block the ability to think in Hebrew. We want the children to think in Hebrew because there is something unique in how Hebrew conveys messages; all languages host a certain cultural feel and Hebrew owns ours. First of all, full meaning can get lost in translation, whether a missed subtlety of a thought or unseen poetry of an expression. Second, Hebrew is a root-based language and each word has a core matrix of three letters from which it evolves; the particular resonance that a well-chosen word brings to an idea or links it to other ideas comes through its root letters. For example, "shalom" can mean "hello," "goodbye," and "peace." Our children learn that the three root letters constitute the word "shalem," meaning "whole," and the holism of peace becomes apparent.

Speaking Hebrew or any language requires children to synthesize thoughts and phrases as they go about their day. It's a special hurdle in second-language learning in the early years. Our teachers continually expand their repertoire of techniques that elicit oral expression and encourage students to speak in Hebrew. The trick is to diversify activities but stay true to the principle that a good language program benefits from a consistent approach year to year, such as adaptive games that work year to year with increasingly complex language lessons. By Grade 6, our students speak Hebrew using past, present, and future tenses; they express themselves comfortably and communicate in abstract concepts. We find that speaking Hebrew easily and comfortably is the path to proficiency.

At Heschel, we have this gratifyingly successful Hebrew program because we infuse the whole school environment with Hebrew. Some students never hear some teachers speak English and are surprised to learn years later that they can! As students walk through our halls, they meet teachers and friends, hear greetings like "*Shalom*!" or "*Boker tov*!" (Good morning) and "*Ma nishma?*" (What's up?), and instructions like "*Bevakasha laamod bashura*" (Please stand in line) and "*Mi poteach et hadelet l'kulam?*" (Who is opening the door for everyone else?). They hear Hebrew slang, which students meet in Grade 7 through film, music, and other Israeli material. The jargon includes "*Al hapanim*," which translates literally as "on the face," but, in common practice, means "just terrible!" One morning, I heard a student at his locker asking a friend in English how he found a recent test. The exasperated reply was, "*Al hapanim!*" I laughed and kept walking.

Hebrew also flows through classes that are not strictly Judaic studies. In Grade 6 math, when constructing sukkot, students follow Mishnaic instructions for measurements of *amot* and *tfachot*. When Grade 5 students read the novel *Underground to Canada*, classroom discussion references the Hebrew concepts of *avdut* (slavery) and *cherut* (freedom), integrating the students' concurrent study of Exodus and Jewish slavery; the language pulls both together.

Hebrew excellence begins with hiring. All Toronto Heschel teachers require a certain level of knowledge and comfort with the Hebrew language. Even if not teaching it, they are present in the classroom, especially in the elementary grades, and role model how Hebrew is spoken in a range of fluency. The school offers teachers weekly Hebrew classes with focus on oral skills; we are a school that sees teachers invest heart and soul in our students' learning and we invest in them.

It has become clear to us that commitment to intensive Hebrew language learning delivers great rewards. Yes, our students are confident learners who can meet the challenges of a second language with all the cognitive rewards that this brings. Yes, they participate in complex tasks in Hebrew and enjoy the full experience of this ancient modern language. But it's even more than this. For our students, Hebrew is a cultural happening that—all by itself—generates personal Jewish identity, a sense of belonging to a people, and an open pathway to our history, tradition, culture, and the modern State of Israel.

Edna Sharet is the Director of Junior High at The Toronto Heschel School.

The Artist at Work

A TRIBUTE TO JUDITH LEITNER

Morah Judy: *Derech eretz* (the ethical path) is a habit of mind, the empathy for fellow artists' diverse learning styles and creative choices.

Rav Heschel: The problem to be faced is how to combine loyalty to one's own tradition with reverence for different traditions. (*Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, 1996)

Judith Leitner is a co-founder of The Toronto Heschel School and has been the Director of Integrated Arts since the school began in 1996. She is an artist, photographer, mother, and grandmother. Through her words and her attention to Rabbi A.J. Heschel's words, we see the expanse of her commitment to the mindset of the creative artist, the joy of original expression, and the reward of discipline and technique.

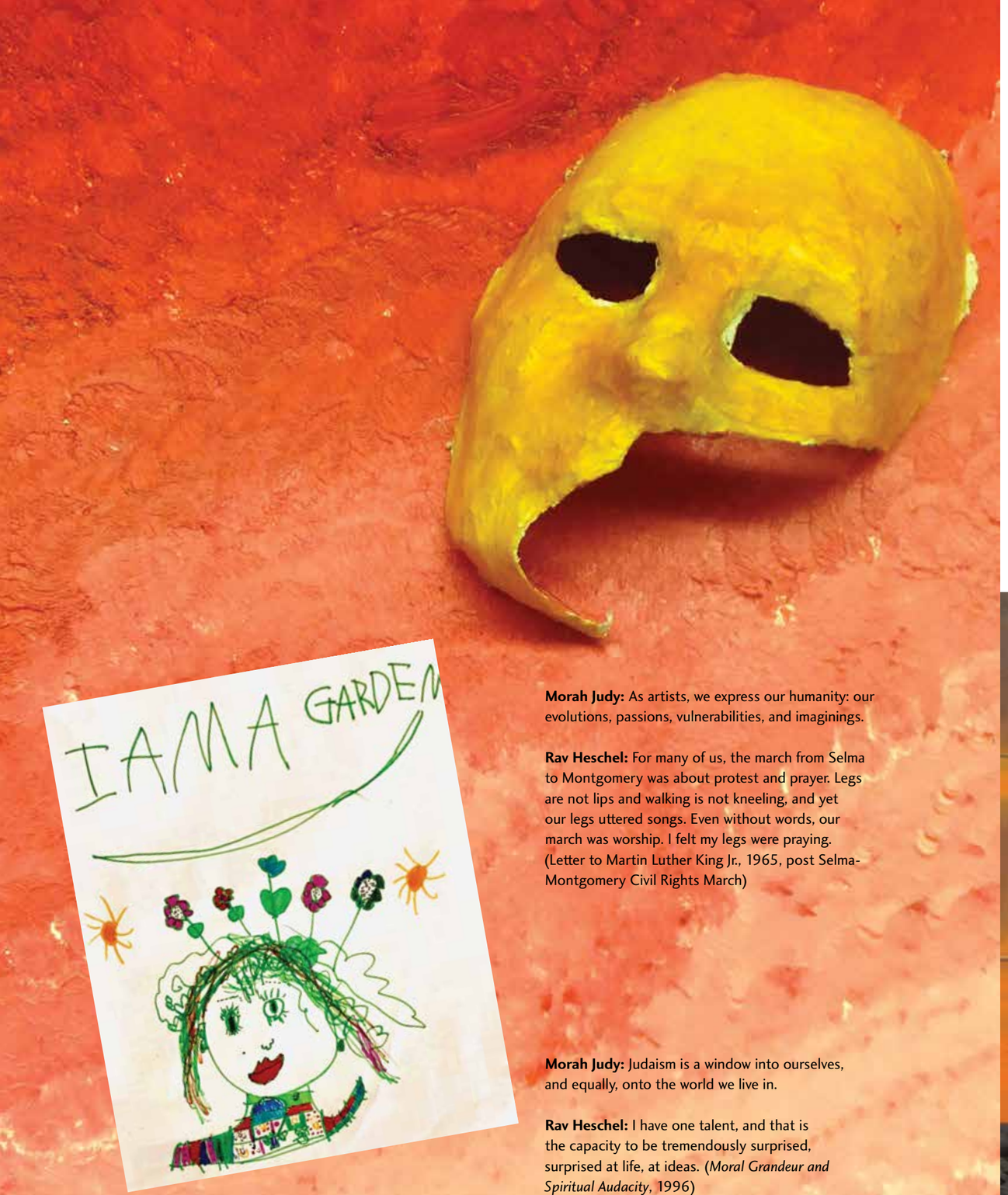
Morah Judy says, "Beauty is a goal, itself."

Rav Heschel is Rabbi A.J. Heschel, z'l' (1907–1972), the spiritual mentor and social action role model of The Toronto Heschel School. His art was to combine the philosophical and the concrete, the most holy and the most mundane. His words here are taken from his spoken and printed publications.

Rav Heschel says, "Above all, remember that you must build your life as if it were a work of art." (Television interview with NBC, 1972)

Morah Judy: We connect to great thinkers and artists; we see ourselves as in their lives and times, and know they are just like us.

Rav Heschel: Authentic thinking originates with an encounter with the world… (*Who Is Man?*, 1965)



Morah Judy: The sketchbook is an essential artist's tool...for imagining, exploring creative possibilities, developing the skill to reference models, to plan, and to find one's unique voice.

Rav Heschel: ...the principle to be kept in mind is to know what we see, rather than to see what we know. (*The Prophets*, 1955/2001)

Morah Judy: Creativity fuses inspiration with technique, the opposing spirits of spontaneity and repeated deliberate practice.

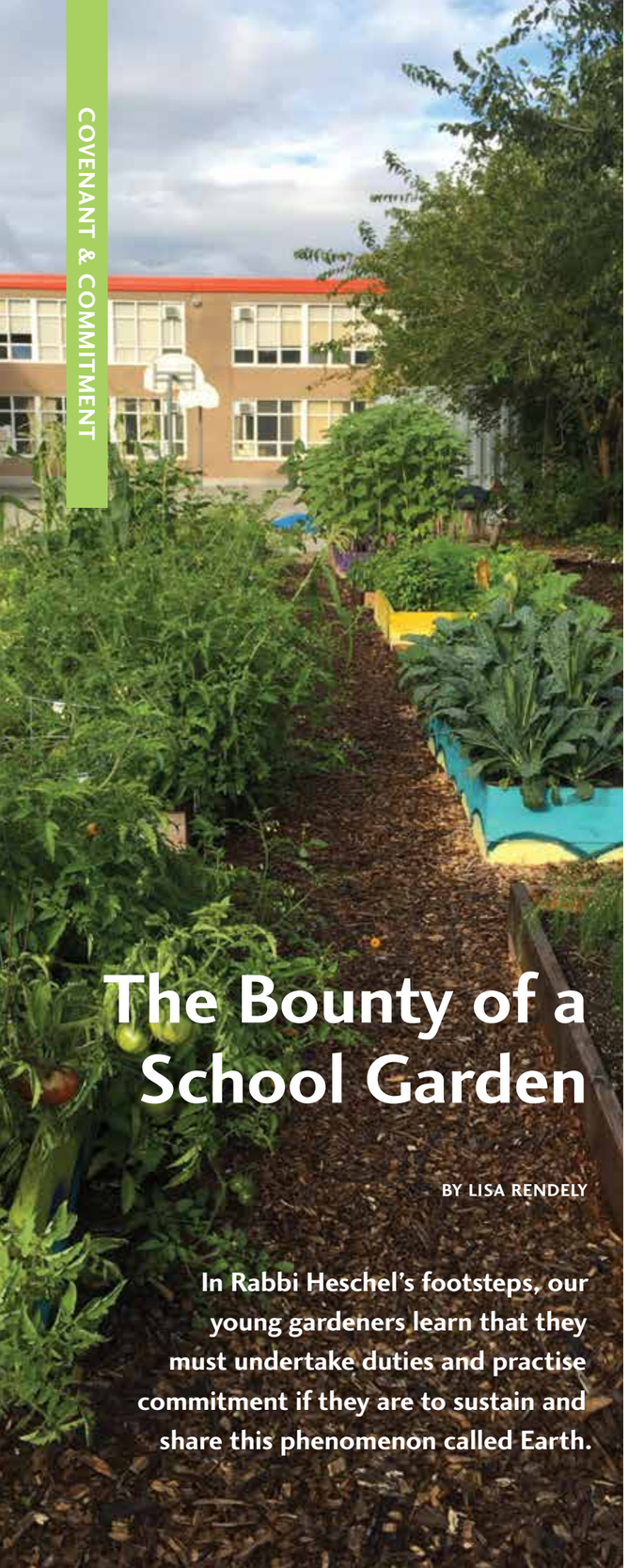
Rav Heschel: There is a specific difficulty of Jewish prayer. There are laws: how to pray, when to pray, what to pray...fixed times, fixed ways, fixed texts. On the other hand, prayer is worship of the heart, the outpouring of the soul, a matter of *kavanah* (inner devotion)… Our great problem...is how not to let the principle of regularity impair the power of spontaneity. (*Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, 1996)

Morah Judy: As artists, we express our humanity: our evolutions, passions, vulnerabilities, and imaginings.

Rav Heschel: For many of us, the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lips and walking is not kneeling, and yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying. (Letter to Martin Luther King Jr., 1965, post Selma-Montgomery Civil Rights March)

Morah Judy: Judaism is a window into ourselves, and equally, onto the world we live in.

Rav Heschel: I have one talent, and that is the capacity to be tremendously surprised, surprised at life, at ideas. (*Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, 1996)



The Bounty of a School Garden

BY LISA RENDELY

In Rabbi Heschel's footsteps, our young gardeners learn that they must undertake duties and practise commitment if they are to sustain and share this phenomenon called Earth.

"Hey, wanna see something cool?" That's all it took for Daniel Abramson, then a new Grade 8 teacher, to get hooked. It was 2010 and Toronto Heschel School Co-Founder Ellen Kessler was in the school garden asking students to take in the wonder around them. The question struck him hard; Daniel saw a new departure for exploration. Now, as the school's lead environmental educator, he calls out the same question, that patch of ground still supporting limitless reflection.

The school's environmental ethos stems from an essential Jewish commitment to respect the earth. The garden mirrors the school's vision. It embodies commitment to integrated learning and is an organic extension of the academic and spiritual inquiry happening inside the school walls. The garden is a metaphor for the education we deliver.

It didn't sprout overnight. Like the rich learning at Toronto Heschel, the garden was planned thoughtfully, meticulously, and, above all, *intentionally*. The premise is the awe and wonder that ground the philosophy of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel; he is the school's namesake and mentor and he asks us to notice what we have, and ponder what we can do with it.

In the spirit of Rabbi Heschel, we are cognizant of the full load of responsibilities we carry: care for the earth, for each other, for Jewish values. The teaching is that, by fulfilling this trust, we come to recognize the fullness of our world. In Rabbi Heschel's footsteps, our young gardeners learn that they must undertake duties and practise commitment if they are to sustain and share this phenomenon called Earth. To this end, the garden generates awe and wonder, pride and delight in all its stewards, be they students, teachers, administrators, or families.

Commitment blossoms in myriad forms. For some, it's a weekly after-school gardening program to tend and weed, harvest the bounty, and put the garden to bed at season's end. A different kind of dedication appears as educators develop and teach interdisciplinary curriculum that weaves various kinds of learning into how and why our garden grows, from the botanical to the biblical to the business of seeds and layout, from the proverbial to the organic. Another flowering of commitment manifests when graduates return to witness the growth of a certain tree or check on flowers that they planted in class years earlier. How ever or wherever it shows, The Toronto Heschel School community can be characterized by its evolving dedication to the garden.

Like learning, the garden must take root, grow, and develop; only then can it flourish and bear fruit. Each grade's curriculum integrates learning from the garden across academic disciplines. In the garden, the children enact the values we teach by experiencing the learning physically, using new tools, and getting their hands dirty; they blend universal knowledge with spirituality.

Greg Beiles, Head of School, sees Jewish education fuse with environmental education and works with teachers to design purposeful opportunities that integrate the two. The garden is a case in point. Greg looks for where students might find a moment of awe and for how this unconventional learning setting might spark wonder in their eyes. While curiosity fosters children's love for natural science, Greg also brings Junior High students outside to encircle a large willow tree as an ideal setting to recite *tefillah* and connect with God amid God's creations.

Take, for example, the bees living on the roof of the Junior Kindergarten (JK) classrooms. They have become a school symbol of commitment to ecology. Learning from the Book of Genesis about the days of creation, Grade 1 children study the complex theme that creations combine to form new creations. To make honey, bees (one of God's animal creations) pollinate the flowers (sown on day three) which then grow, helped by sun and water (days three and four). The honey is harvested and enjoyed by humans, but only after it has had time to rest (day seven). First-hand experience with bees deepens the children's understanding of the miracles of creation.

Beth Lawrence is a parent volunteer, a professional gardener, and a landscape artist. She professes commitment to growing "the physical and metaphysical garden." One year, she levelled the earth to start fresh and, doing so, refreshed enthusiasm among faculty, students, and parents. Official Provincial Flowers now grow in the Grade 4 section, enhancing study of the Canadian provinces; a herb garden connects in a special way to Grade 2; and JK students plant potatoes one year, and harvest them the next, for delectable latkes on Chanukah.

Beth leads the garden club, which fertilizes meaningful relationships between children and the garden as well as interpersonal relations between families and friends. Shared duties establish collaboration and strengthen bonds within the school community. As parents and grandparents play and work with their children among the vegetables and flowers, Beth notices the older generations taking pleasure in teaching, appreciating the chance to leave their young with lasting knowledge of the world, personally delivered.

Daniel Abramson introduces Grade 7 students to the joy of the unknown; they plant a tree whose fruits they will not see as students, but know it will benefit generations to come. Planning for the future means cultivating today for the good of someone else tomorrow.

Daniel teaches about earlier inhabitants of the land that is this garden. His Grade 8 students read the *Truth and Reconciliation Act* and, in 2015, planted a First Nations Healing Garden of traditional medicinal plants. The class annually harvests tobacco and sweetgrass and welcomes First Nations educators to receive them as gifts. As Grade 8 at Toronto Heschel blends Torah themes with human rights, civil rights, and social action from September to June, the Healing Garden is a hands-on anchor to year-long discussion; students perform concretely useful deeds for the benefit of others, through commitment, not obligation.

Rabbi Heschel wrote,

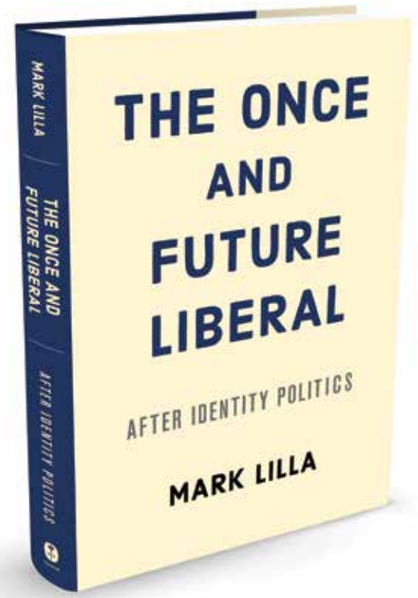
> Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement...get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed.[1]

The Toronto Heschel garden is an invitation to take in wonder and be amazed. It sees children explore, play creatively, smell flowers, and measure an asparagus stalk; their horizons expand. How lucky to have this garden. How lucky that our students plant their roots among those of sunflowers, kale, peonies, and fruit trees and, like them, blossom over the course of their years at the school, experiencing awe and wonder time and again.

1 Rabbi A. J. Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976).

Lisa Rendely teaches Grade 5 and visual art at The Toronto Heschel School. She studied and practised architecture before pursuing a career in education, and integrates her art and design background into her daily classroom teaching.

Our Sages Tell Us



Are Jewish identity politics
a hazard to a national Jewish vision

Mission Creep

BY RABBI JOE KANOFSKY

Mark Lilla teaches history at Columbia University in New York City, a vantage point that affords him a front-row seat in the campus culture wars. His latest book, *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics*,[1] forms an extended meditation on how American liberalism in general, and the Democratic Party in particular, lost their way over the past two generations. He raises both tactical and strategic challenges for a liberal movement currently hoping to regain its commitment and stride in the next election cycle. Contemporary North American Jews might benefit from the same self-examination that Lilla proposes for liberal democrats.

The main thrust of Lilla's lament is that the Democratic Party was weakened by a self-inflicted wound of "identity politics." Identity politics is the shift from "we" to "me." It overshadows the collective sense of citizenship and common purpose with an individualized sense of personal identity. A liberal movement so entwined in particularistic concerns of its own making was easy prey for conservatism's subsequent onslaughts, first of "anti-politics" (the Reagan-era claim that "government is the problem") followed by "pseudo-politics" ("a resentful, disuniting rhetoric of difference").[2] In its current highly personalized iteration, liberalism has failed at the organizational level to articulate a compelling vision of what unites Americans.[3] At best, it articulates to divide them.

One way to sum up this crisis of American liberalism is in terms of "mission creep": you start out in pursuit of a goal, but so many concerns arise and divert attention and effort from the original goal. In a world of limited resources, only the most persistent seekers can hope to achieve their aims. The balance-beam gymnast or tightrope walker holds the best chance by maintaining equilibrium and focus, despite countervailing winds and peripheral distractions. Valuable lessons for our contemporary Jewish community abound in this analysis.

As individuals and as a community, the Jewish people risk compromising our enduring and unique mission to the well-meaning yet ultimately draining "identity politics" that beleaguers American liberalism, in Lilla's telling. Whatever the electoral fortunes of the Democratic Party and American liberalism may be, the Jewish people seem fated to endure. The question then becomes: How can the Jewish people articulate and hold fast to our core vision? How do we as Jews remain focused and resist the attractive but ancillary causes, campaigns, and conversations that divert our energy and soften our focus over the long term?

Our Judaism occasionally suffers from this mission creep that diverts energy towards minor skirmishes on the cultural front of individual fulfillment. Concerns answered today risk being irrelevant to the next generation, while there is potential drift from our bedrock ideals and a divisiveness that portends an inability to come together to re-evaluate and recalculate the path. In the era of personal identities, the living tree of Torah still grows for the sake of continuity, not just for us; and not only for this particular historical moment. Can we make sure that the benefit of the doubt falls towards allegiance to our collective Jewish spirit, not away from it? A classic parable suggests reflection on guarding our values as the Jewish people:

> A king sent a courtier on a global fact-finding mission with a single instruction: accept no bets. At one distant court, the ambassador was rebuffed by its sovereign, who asked, "How can we admit a slave to our court?" The ambassador protested, but the king replied, "It's obvious to me that you are a slave. And I know that, in your country, slaves are branded on their left shoulder, so I would bet a thousand gold coins that you bear that mark." The ambassador thought, "My king specifically forbade me to bet, but this is a sure thing, not really a bet at all! I will bring the reward home to my sovereign, and his honour and mine will be intact." The ambassador showed his unblemished shoulder to the assemblage and carried home the thousand gold coins. Presenting the gold to his king, he watched the king's face fall. "Oh, no!" cried the king. "I told you no bets! You see, this king once bet me twenty thousand gold pieces that he could make my ambassador remove his shirt in public!"

Mission creep tempted this traveller with a self-evident and worthwhile "sure thing" that seemed at least as valuable as his original assignment. Ultimately, he claimed a small victory but failed in his larger purpose. Mission creep has an upside and a downside. The upside is that what we're doing feels important, worthwhile, valuable, and self-justifying. The downside, of course, is that the original goal is imperilled. With incomplete information, the ambassador lost out on the larger goal; in life we must protect our mission from that which is tempting but fleeting.

Insofar as our Judaism emphasizes our collective identity, national values, and eternal goals; we are well-grounded in maintaining the hope of the prophetic vision of a just society and a holy nation. As Lilla writes at the outset, "There can be no liberal politics without a sense of we—of what we are as citizens and what we owe each other." And his remedy: "We must re-learn how to speak to citizens as citizens and to frame our appeals…in terms of principles that everyone can affirm."[4]

Mutatis mutandis, as the late great sociologist of religion Peter Berger would say, if we exchange "citizen" for "Jew," we might recognize the hazard that our own Jewish identity politics pose to our ability to articulate a national Jewish vision for the present, let alone the future. Perhaps as we step back from overemphasizing our distinctions—our ever-fissuring streams—we might be a step closer to constructing an "imaginative, hopeful vision of what we share…and what we might accomplish together."[5]

1 Mark Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics* (New York: Harper, 2017).
2 Ibid., p. 59.
3 Ibid., p. 15.
4 Ibid., pp. 14, 15.
5 Ibid., p. 59.

Rabbi Joe Kanofsky, PhD, earned a Doctorate in Comparative Literature from Boston University. He was ordained at the Rabbinical College of America where he was a Wexner Fellow. From 2001 to 2004 he was Director of the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation in Poland and currently serves as Rabbi of Kehillat Shaarei Torah in Toronto.

I am thankful that my kids went to school where Judaism was imparted in a non-mechanical way that engendered a love of Judaism.

The Choices We Make

Why I Sent My Kids to Heschel in 1997

BY BARRY BANK, FATHER AND GRANDFATHER

Back in the 1990s, as a psychologist/neuroscientist who was doing research on learning and memory, I had pretty strong opinions about how human beings acquired information; the conventional manner in which information was being imparted to young schoolchildren was dead wrong. You can imagine my glee when my wife told me about a new Hebrew day school in Toronto that had opened and was based on principles that reflected my thinking. It offered multi-sensory learning, a low student-to-teacher ratio, and a reliance on active learning through experience. Lastly, there was to be an emphasis on "arts-based" learning (something unfortunately much misunderstood elsewhere at the time).

I'll get straight to reminiscencing. I recall my son's first major assignment when he was in Grade 5; the class was studying an organ system in the human body. One group actually built an arm with elastics as muscles. Incredibly creative but, more importantly, I'm firmly convinced that if I asked those students today how to distinguish an adductor from an abductor, they could do it. I loved the idea that they were learning through doing.

Once packing for a trip, I needed a siddur and grabbed one off the shelf at home. Opening it, I saw that it was my daughter's Heschel siddur from years ago and completely marked up with notes, translations, and a section that said "My favourite prayer." As I davened, seeing her handwritten notes from when she was little, brought tears to my eyes. I was thankful that my kids went to a school where Judaism was imparted in a non-mechanical way that engendered a love of Judaism.

An important aspect of the Heschel philosophy is the emphasis on learning through active discovery and experience. I fondly recall the students performing plays that they had written based on the last novel that they had studied in class. My son can still discuss that novel today in great detail. I can't remember one book I read in Grade 5.

The feature of Heschel that touched me most was how individuality was celebrated. There were some very unique students with very special talents. At Heschel they were motivated to develop their talents and shine. This encouragement and acceptance was as much on the part of the students as the teachers. Those students would have languished elsewhere.

As long-term effects go, I have observed that my son's professional development is imbued with a strong creative component. Education is more than acquiring information. The ability to use that information in creative new ways is the hallmark of a great education. I like to think that my son's ability to infuse his professional endeavours with that strong creative element is thanks to Heschel.

Reflecting back on when I first heard news of this new school called Heschel, initially I thought it sounded great in theory but short on proven success. With such lofty objectives, my question was whether the school could pull it off. We decided to roll the dice and give it a whirl. There were definitely bumps along the way. Did our gamble pay off? My son, Mitchell, was in the school's first graduating class, and his son, having started JK this past September, is the first son of a Heschel grad, a "grand-student."

Barry Bank received his PhD in Psychology and Neuroscience at the University of Toronto, worked as a Postdoctoral Fellow at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, MD, and is now with his family at Bank Bros. & Son Ltd. in Toronto.

And Why I Chose It in 2017

BY MITCHELL BANK, ALUMNUS AND DAD

I first walked into The Toronto Heschel School when I was in Grade 4. My mom told me that I was going to visit a new school for the day to see if I might go there the next year. It was not easy at nine years old to face the prospect of leaving best friends and entering a new place with all new faces, but I decided to go along. Twenty years later, I can still remember the moment I walked into the classroom. Three of the boys immediately welcomed me in as if I had been going to school with them forever. They invited me to sit with them in class, play with them at recess, and eat lunch with them. On a day where any kid would rightfully expect to feel like a lonely newcomer, I felt the exact opposite. Based on that experience, I agreed to give Heschel a try. I had never met other kids who were so kind, guileless, and outward thinking, traits that the school instills in its students to this day.

Little did I know, the unique qualities of the student body weren't the only reasons I would love Heschel. Over the course of my four years as a student there, I learned how to think outside the box, use my creativity to solve problems, and discover that learning is something we should *love* to do. From making pinhole cameras in art, to writing our own plays for school assemblies, to learning to play percussion instruments, Heschel taught me that the ability to think creatively is our most valuable asset, both in the classroom and in life. This would turn out to be the most powerful lesson I ever learned at school.

Today, as a parent of a JK student at Heschel, it warms my heart to see that the school has not only maintained these wonderful qualities but has also enhanced them. When my wife and I first went to visit the school, it was the students who offered to hold doors open for us. When I visited again to celebrate my cousin's Bar Mitzvah during the school's morning *tefillah*, I was blown away by the depth of what his friends and classmates said about him.

Then, another Heschel parent told us about a project her daughter was doing in class, and we were sold. Each student had taken a shoebox, put a picture of themselves on it, and filled it with depictions of all of the things important to them in life. The shoebox, she explained, represented the student as a person; the picture showed the physical self and the inside demonstrated the *neshama*, the soul. We could not believe that kids so young were doing a project so profound.

These experiences embody what makes Heschel unique and why we decided that it was the best school for our son. One semester into our experience as Heschel parents and we couldn't be happier. Our son comes home every day excited about what he learned at school. He tells us about everything from outdoor exploration to the song he's learning about Bereishit, and he's even speaking Hebrew unprompted. We love the weekly emails from Morah Vivi and Morah Sari, and the opportunity to experience his learning along with him. Mostly, we're thrilled that the Heschel philosophy is alive and strong, and that we are lucky enough to send our son to such a wonderful school. My hope is that, one day, my son will be as proud to be a Heschel graduate as I am.

We could not believe that kids so young were doing a project so profound.

Mitchell Bank is a graduate of The Toronto Heschel School, CHAT, and Dalhousie University. He is an entrepreneur and runs a leather goods company in Toronto where he lives with his wife and three sons.

Learn and Live

A CIVIL RIGHTS JOURNEY THROUGH THE AMERICAN DEEP SOUTH

BY AVISHAI SOL AND MAX ABRAHAMS

We saw how history is in the hands of its storytellers.

We are two friends. From the moment we were given the opportunity to spend 12 days in the American Deep South learning about past and present Civil Rights struggles, we knew this was a journey we wanted to take together. It seemed a natural and fascinating continuation of our 10 years at The Toronto Heschel School. Maybe, with the other Jewish high school students on our trip, we would help figure out the future of the Civil Rights movement and what our part in it might be. In any case, we wanted to see it for ourselves, and together.

One July day in New Orleans we met up with other Jewish students from around North America to begin our journey. From enjoying the beignets to visiting the Second World War museum, the first couple of days felt like a blaze of new experiences. The heat, the food, and the city—it was all a positive culture shock, making the experience immediately memorable and unique.

Driving to Jackson, Mississippi, we visited two old plantations that have been turned into museums and historic tourist attractions. They presented the history very differently. The Whitney Plantation in Wallace, Louisiana, focused intensely on slaves' experiences and daily lives. Walking through the site in 35-degree heat left little to the imagination, while the abandoned buildings and shabby workers' living quarters were blatant reminders of the horror of American slavery. The second plantation, Longwood Plantation in Natchez, Mississippi, seemed almost wary of speaking about slavery. It had been the estate of a very rich landowner who had built a magnificent house, and the tour focused more on the history of this particular wealthy family. While we learned a lot about the family's history and experiences, we couldn't help but wonder about the other residents on that land. We saw how history is in the hands of its storytellers. These different takes on the same time period made us wonder about how we learn and tell our own story.

Our journey continued in Selma, Alabama, where Rabbi A.J. Heschel had marched alongside Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. As Toronto Heschel School alumni, we know this story as well as we know our math or Chumash. In Selma, we spoke with a woman who had been a student leader at the time and took part in the march. She told us about the emotions and power of the march and how important Rabbi Heschel's involvement had been. She showed us where he slept. What we had imagined came to life.

In Birmingham, we stood on the stairs of the 16th Street Baptist Church in the exact location of the tragic bombing in 1963. We tried to understand and visualize what life was like in the most segregated town in the United States. We felt inspired and intrigued to journey from the roots of the Civil Rights movement to the issues and dilemmas of the present day.

We experienced more upbeat activities in Mississippi. The Grammy Museum in Cleveland was incredible and the B.B. King Museum in Indianola was equally fun. We enjoyed the long bus rides, the R&B music, and, of course, delicious Southern food. Many interesting conversations emerged among our group, and we explored neighbourhoods and towns during our free time.

While travelling on through Mississippi, we met with leaders from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and delved into the problems of free speech. We sat with criminal justice lawyers from the Emmet Till Interpretive Center and spoke about those who are wrongly incarcerated. Lawyers at the Equal Justice Institute told us about child incarceration, and we learned about the past and present work of the Southern Law Poverty Center. We were inspired by these leaders who are dedicating their lives to bringing justice to people whose lives have become marginalized.

In Greenwood, our last stop in Mississippi, we visited the Institute of Southern Jewish Life where we discovered the unique way that Jewish life evolved in the South, and we discussed our shared narratives within this Jewish American story. On Shabbat we lead discussions and services at Ahavath Rayim, the only Jewish congregation in the city; the sole members were four generations of one family, including one Holocaust survivor.

As soon as the trip began, we knew how fortunate we were to have attended The Toronto Heschel School. We found that our knowledge was deep and extensive on the subject of civil rights; part of who we have become as Jews is to stand up for civil rights and feel a sense of ownership in this advocacy work. The entire trip was reminiscent of a Grade 8 culminating project at Toronto Heschel, for which we wrote and presented a human rights speech that was based in both Talmudic and international law.

We are determined as Jews, and as global and Canadian citizens, to use the best of our traditions to make a positive difference in this world. Rabbi Heschel felt his legs were praying when he physically marched, and spiritually supported, the Civil Rights struggle in the United States. Since our Grade 5 year at Toronto Heschel, we have been challenged to explore how we will pray with our legs and effect change, both as a group and as individuals. We take the lessons of this trip back with us to high school in Toronto. More than ever before, we are determined to stand up physically and spiritually for justice and for those in need.

Avishai Sol and **Max Abrahams** graduated from The Toronto Heschel School and are now Grade 11 students in Toronto.

Showing Up

BY JASMINE ELIAV

We can look at commitment from two directions. Some of our obligations arise from external expectations, such as our unspoken commitment to be a law-abiding driver or dutiful mortgagee. Others are internally motivated, perhaps through a role we want to fulfill, such as wife, husband, volunteer, or sales agent of the month. The first is a frame and the second is a blank canvas.

Martin Seligman, the world-renowned authority in positive psychology, offers a theory on well-being that is well worth remembering daily. In his book *Flourish*,[1] he explains that our long-term well-being is connected to the thoughtfulness that we bring to our commitments. His simple proposition is that we should focus on developing positive emotions and positive relationships, especially notions such as inspiration, curiosity, pleasure, gratitude; we should be gunning for "flow"—that highly aspirational yet elusive state—which develops when we involve ourselves authentically in a task and are rewarded, as a result, with a sense of accomplishment.

What I'd like to add is that flow arises not just in practising hot yoga, creating a masterwork, or solving an engineering dilemma. Flow happens when we are fully present, when we recognize our specific purpose in the moment, and remove barriers that keep our goals distant. Flow happens when we engage wholeheartedly. So the question is: Do we engage authentically with all of our commitments? How are we showing up?

We have to commit to finding flow every day. Yes, flow can be playing in your band, or losing sense of time and place while immersed in a fabulous book. However, flow is also available while driving in rush-hour traffic with your children. It appears when we take a deep breath and realize, "Hello, I am in my car with my beautiful children. I have the power to shift the mood in this shared time to something meaningful and positive."

This shift can put us in the zone of well-being. The feel good part is obvious, but equally important and less visible is the psychological truth that whether or not we are in a positive space has a long lasting impact on our children; whatever we do we are either generating or debilitating their positive outlook on life. If our habitual method of personal engagement—whether in traffic, an operating room, a kitchen, or on a skating rink—breeds in us feelings of pressure, compulsion, and lack of free will, then, regrettably, what our children are learning from us is toxic.

There are many elements to engaging or "committing." Of course, it requires physical presence. It also requires emotional presence and awareness. Examine the "vibe" underlying how we talk; remember that the emotional loading behind our words infuses them with significant meaning. Here's the ad: Are you more often than not complaining and resentful? Do you express frustration with your commitments and seek excuses to get out of them? If so, rest assured you are not living in flow.

Our children should see and hear us living our lives with interest, enthusiasm, and gratitude most of the time. They are watching as we run to a meeting, plan a holiday dinner, leave for the office, help our extended family, and buy milk. They hear the words we use and how we describe our expectations. They drink in the moods we display and the overall attitude that we bring to what we do. We would do well to consider carefully how what they see and hear from us reflects back in their attitudes towards participation and commitment, let alone life itself.

Yes, there are barriers to the ability to be present and find flow. We can see them if we notice the language that we use to describe our commitments; it sets the lens through which our children look. The lens names our true feelings. A sense of externally imposed behaviour comes through words like "I have to, it's my responsibility, it's the right thing, I have to keep my word, I feel a sense of duty and/or obligation." We can use these words but we have to load them with positivity and free them from negative feelings. They can either invoke a sense of enslavement or a motivated commitment.

Hopefully, already we know to create rituals and cultivate a special consciousness on holidays and milestones. Special occasions are well understood to call up meaningful presence and participation with commitment. To optimize the growth and development of our children, we have to bring this awareness to the every day.

Many families want to sit happily together on a school night for a meal but fail. They struggle with competing schedules. Sometimes when it does happen, the house feels chaotic, the meal feels rushed. A weekly family dinner allows us to check it off our "good parents do this" list. But, what does this dinner truly accomplish if we only show up physically.

Emotional presence requires a conscious decision to make the casual weeknight dinner a valuable moment. We start by recognizing our ability to cultivate a state of "flow" in our home; perhaps all the electronics are off and gentle music is on, or not. We sit together at the table, whether or not the food is homemade, and we talk about our days—positive and relaxed. It only takes half an hour.

It makes all the difference if we envision our family, if we prioritize how we show up and notice the affect and intentionality we bring to our little group. We are all just looking for a way to integrate our values into daily life; it works best if it is prosocial consistently. We are not just talking values, we are living them; we are showing up committed. The challenge is to notice choice. Imagine what you want on your canvas and commit to it.

1 Martin Seligman, *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being* (New York: Free Press, 2011).

Dr. Jasmine Eliav is a registered child clinical psychologist. She has her own private practice, is a staff psychologist at the Hospital for Sick Children, a clinical consultant to BOOST Child Abuse Prevention and Intervention, and a member of The Toronto Heschel School Board of Directors.

Our long-term well-being is connected to the thoughtfulness that we bring to our commitments.
Martin Seligman

The Toronto Heschel School

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