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THiNK

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JOURNAL

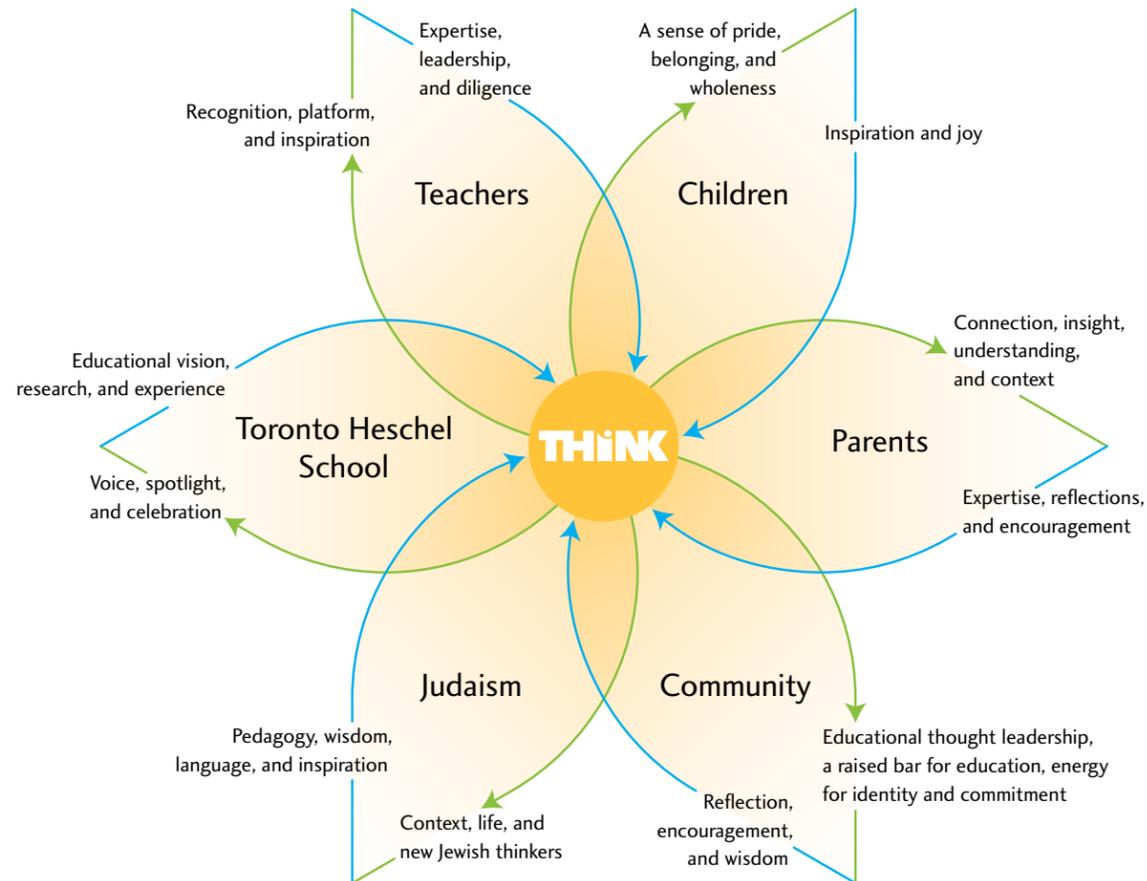
Conversation about Education, Ethics, and Our Children

EMBRACING COMPLEXITY

CHUTZPAH AND HUMILITY IN LEARNING / PLURALISM IN ACTION /
THE ELEMENTS OF CREATION IN GRADE TWO / WEAVING NARRATIVES /
WHAT PICTURE BOOKS CAN DO / BEHAVIOUR GROWS WHERE ATTENTION GOES

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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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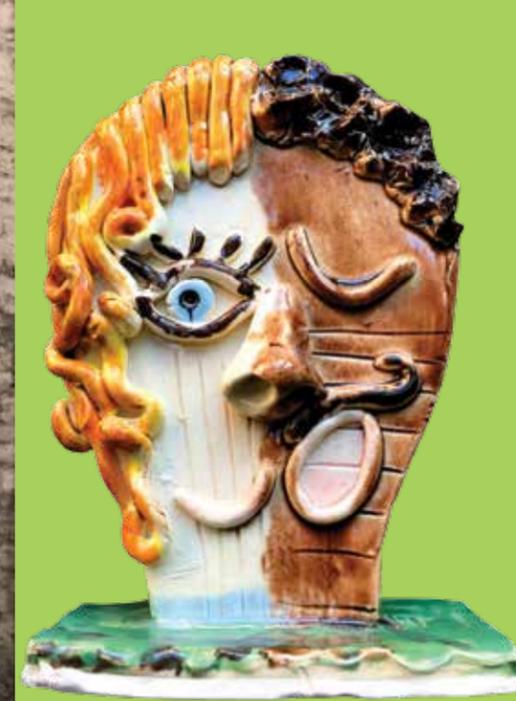


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Negotiating deep water is no easy task...Youngsters should be self-aware and comfortable with complex ideas.

Swimming Lessons

Spring approaches and our days begin to warm. The Talmud mentions swimming lessons in its list of parental obligations. Given the age in which the words were written, yes, they reference fathers and sons, but I relate them to caregivers as a genre:

With respect to his son, a father is obligated to circumcise him, to redeem him [if he is a firstborn], to teach him Torah, to marry him off, and to teach him a craft. Some say, he is also obligated to teach him to swim. (Kiddushin 29a)

Notice how the list proceeds from the child's helplessness to independence. Parents are to first confirm their babes as members of the tribe and situate them within our tradition. As the child grows, parents provide a guide to daily life through Torah, they support the child while building a family, they educate for self-sufficiency, and, finally, they give swimming lessons. Following this curve, it just can't be that parents are to hold off on swimming lessons until after their children are married. Swimming is a metaphor for teaching children to survive in contexts that would be challenging, even life threatening, without preparation and skill.

The Book of Proverbs offers a clue: "The designs in one's mind are deep waters; But a person of understanding can draw them out" (Proverbs 20:5).

Negotiating deep water is no easy task. There is no base to stand on as the usual devices for support and direction—arms and legs—flail. Even a pause to breathe and take stock becomes troublesome. The metacognition and patience needed in times of struggle require youngsters to be self-aware and comfortable with complex ideas. They must be accepting of thoughts that jar and collide and not shrink from the tension. They must be unfazed by cumbersome details and unanswered questions. This issue of THINK highlights the educational approach that motivates and schools a child to become a "person of understanding" who can swim in

deep waters, well prepared for challenge and mindful of her own purposes, in touch with his own counsel.

In *Awe and Wonder*, Greg Beiles looks at Jewish education through the lens of complexity theory; both deal in dynamic interconnections and both take on the mysteries around us. In the Learning Centre, Dvora Goodman shares research that reveals the capacity of young children to hold conflicting ideas in their heads and describes multi-layered thinking in early childhood education. In "Pluralism in Action," she reveals the symbiosis between well-structured Junior High pluralism and the life skills of composure and thoughtfulness.

From Kindergarten to Junior High, a thoughtful curriculum will develop skills needed to swim in deep waters. Judith Leitner cultivates the self-aware mindset of a young artist. Using the creation story from the Book of Genesis, she fosters her students' capacity for focus and reflection, as well as their power to plan and achieve creative objectives. Lisa Rendely introduces Grade 5 students to the effective use of symbolism and abstract thought. Her students examine biblical and historical narratives to learn about slavery and freedom and then, through a multi-stage project in conceptual art, they restate emblematically what they found.

We THINK about complexity outside the classroom. Jasmine Eliav reflects on what happens when parents oversimplify, generalize, and forget to respect the particularity that each child deserves. Writer Ava Kwinter is new—and most welcome—to our roster of THINK contributors. She dissects a simple bedtime story to expose an intricate network of factors that inform how we communicate with our children. Michelle Shulman explores the political promise that social diversity holds for the State of Israel where Hand in Hand schools now educate an integrated student body made up of Jews, Arabs, Christians, and everyone in between.

Swimming can be so much fun. Take a deep breath and dive in!

Pam

The Complexity of Jewish Learning

BY GREG BEILES

As Jewish educators interested in how Judaism addresses big life questions, the standard rationale of cultural literacy or identity is insufficient. The idea of God is very complex. Human beings are very complex. Educators have to internalize this and speak in terms that reveal how the Jewish people, the sources of Judaism, and the fact of religion itself are each nuanced, layered phenomena.

In *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living*, American author Krista Tippett writes that what she admires most about religion is “its robust tradition of wrestling with the maddening complexity of human nature, human action, human being.”¹ She invites us to consider how religion offers a time-tested model for making sense of the interplay of human purpose, emotion, and sense of being.

Reading Tippett, I wonder if we might consider Jewish learning as complexity theory for life. Complexity theory is a new way of thinking about systems with highly interconnected and interdependent parts, “systems and problems that are dynamic, unpredictable and multi-dimensional.”²

My hope with this article is not to merely recapitulate the well-worn notion that we all have different opinions, and that therein lies the complexity of Judaism—but rather that this complexity is found deeply in multiple aspects of Jewish thought. This is not an academic exercise, but what we teach at The Toronto Heschel School. A well-known rabbinic teaching, much discussed in community day schools, tells that every Jew throughout the ages was personally present at Mount Sinai to receive the Torah. Why? Because everyone hears things differently and so each of us is necessary for the complexity of truth to be fully revealed.³ Just as the content of each voice communicates some aspect of truth, so too does the form, tone, and register of the voice communicate different dimensions of truth.

Complexity theory comprehends system feedback. An important theological dimension of Judaism understands creation as providing this dialogue. God is the creator of the world and of humanity, which are inextricably interconnected. The Bible echoes this repeatedly, with many rabbinic teachings on the theme. Rabbi A.J. Heschel says that the earth and humanity are co-created as siblings.⁴ How we read, interpret, and act upon the signs given to us by the world, our sibling, is a matter best left to science (see “Awe and Wonder” in *THINK* issue #23, <https://torontoheschel.org/think-magazine/method-and-wonder>). But that we *ought* to give ear to the proverbial voice of the earth is fundamentally Jewish that complexity theory reminds us to consider.

The Torah holds two creation stories. Genesis 1 describes how human beings created *b'tzelem elohim* with a hierarchy of given responsibilities. Genesis 2 describes a more contractual relationship between nature and humans:

Now all the trees of the field were not yet on the earth and all the herb of the field had not yet sprouted, for God had not sent rain upon the earth and there was no one to work the soil. A mist ascended from the earth and watered the whole surface of the soil. Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and blew into his nostrils the soul of life, and man became a living being. (Genesis 2:5–7)

Here earth and humanity are inextricably intertwined. A *midrash* plays on the words “vegetation” (*siach*) and “conversation” (*sichah*), suggesting that humanity and nature are in constant dialogue (Midrash Genesis Rabba 13:2).

Elsewhere in the Torah we also see nature as feedback. When we observe *mitzvot*, the earth provides us with its bounty; when we do not, the skies dry up and “the earth does not provide us with its plenty” (Deuteronomy 11:13–17). Twenty-first-century science shows that failing to appreciate humans as part of earth’s ecosystem is dangerously naive. We are continually in need of more paradigms for the complex ways in which human beings and earth systems are connected.

There is of course unity in a complex system; the human body is an example with its many different physiological parts, networks, and arrangements. We teach that God is One, and that the idea of God is complex. Jews do not configure images of God nor form a singular, simplistic conception; the Torah recounts many ways in which people *experience the qualities* of God: father, mother, teacher, guide, ruler, healer.

A.J. Heschel notes that Judaism has only one symbol for God: the human being, who is created *b'tzelem elohim*—in the image of God. Our God has many aspects, dimensions, and possibilities, and humans mirror this complexity. A rabbinic teaching compares God to a coinmaker who makes coins of equal value, minting them identically, but, through the remarkable power that is God, making each unique with individual combinations of qualities (Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 39a). We work very hard with our students to develop this notion of diversity within unity; it’s sophisticated thinking, but a good teacher can share it with his/her students.

The Jewish people form a single nation that is complex—linguistically, culturally, and in how we express Judaism. Our school nurtures intentional pluralism that seeks out and celebrates Jewish diversity and teaches that many practices produce Jewish meaning: Torah study, prayer, Hebrew, *mitzvot* (commandments), acts of *zedakah* (righteousness),

We teach that God is One, and that the idea of God is complex.

Tikkun Olam (repair of the world), and ritual celebration. We appreciate Rabbi Heschel’s teaching that *mitzvot* cannot be assigned particular reasons or meanings; rather, every *mitzvah*, every Jewish act, is one of many “sources of emergent meaning.”⁵

As complexity theory teaches us, even dynamic, unpredictable systems produce order-generating rules. The *Tohu Vavohu* (chaos) prior to creation configured into the forms of our physical, social, and spiritual universe. Together with an appreciation of dynamism and creativity, we also appreciate order and configuration. Judaism has many forms—forms for prayer, forms for holiday celebration, forms for study. These forms are worth learning, mastering, and studying—because forms produce meanings, even if we do not know in advance what meaning. As Franz Rosenzweig wrote to his friend Martin Buber, one philosopher to another,

We do not know in advance what is and what is not Jewish teaching...[But] the way to the teaching leads through what is “knowable”; at least that is the high road, the sole road one can in good faith recommend to every questioner.⁶

Mystery and mastery are iterative, interwoven, interdependent experiences. Judaism is complex because it offers guidelines and practices for making meaning out of mystery.

Krista Tippett observes that the narratives and rituals of religious traditions are “tools for the art of living,” “pieces of intelligence about human behaviour,” and “spiritual technologies for being our best selves.”⁷ Religion offers intricate sensitive mechanisms that serve the complicated matter of living. The complexity of Jewish learning is in itself a complexity theory for life.

1 Krista Tippett, *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living* (New York: Penguin, 2016), p. 8.

2 Ibid., p. 1.

3 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 195.

4 A.J. Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), p. 94.

5 Abraham Joshua Heschel, “No Time for Neutrality,” in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, edited by Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1996), p. 77.

6 Franz Rosenzweig, “The Builders: Concerning the Law,” in *On Jewish Learning*, edited by N.N. Glazer (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 2002), pp. 80–81.

7 Tippett, *Becoming Wise*, p. 9.

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



Chutzpah and Humility

BY DVORA GOODMAN

Parker Palmer, a well-known educator and author, highlights a critical paradox in education: Our children require both *chutzpah* and *humility*.¹ *Chutzpah* (“audacity” in Hebrew) refers to personal boldness in the sense of healthy independence and individual expression, and *humility* describes the notion that “truth” usually comes through listening closely to what others have to say. How do we help our children develop this kind of sophisticated, and sometimes conflicted, state of mind?

As a parent watching three Toronto Heschel School students whose ages span 10 years, I can claim a bird’s-eye view of what’s going on at our school. I can see the curriculum as it correlates with the intellectual and emotional progress of my children at their different stages of development. My Grade 7 son began learning Talmud this year, and I watch him interpreting concepts relating to the shape of a shofar: straight or curvy? A metaphor for life itself. His teachers have him reading *The Outsiders*, by S.E. Hinton, a complicated teen novel about social dynamics and emotions. What set him up for this? One might think that preparation for this kind of multi-dimensional, multi-layered thinking would begin in Junior High, or maybe in late elementary school. Don’t young children have developing brains that only understand things in black and white? A close look at early childhood education shows me otherwise.

Israel—a complex topic in itself—is a hot topic in the field of Jewish education, with much debate over how children learn about Israel’s many conflicts and at what age

this learning should begin. An important research study was conducted over the past few years by social scientist Dr. Sivan Zakai, who directs the Children’s Learning About Israel Project and co-directs Project Orli: Research and Leadership in Israel Education at the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University. Dr. Zakai set out to uncover what young children understand about Israel and conducted interviews with 33 kindergarteners over the course of a year at three Los Angeles Jewish day schools. She concluded:

Kindergarteners’ conceptions of Israel were multilayered. All of these children, aged 5 and 6, were able to simultaneously hold in their heads multiple ideas about Israel, and the vast majority were able to hold multiple conflicting ideas at once.²

Inspired by this study, I am keenly watching my five year-old in Senior Kindergarten make sense of what he is learning in school. I asked Heidi Friedman, Director of Early Years at Toronto Heschel, for examples of units of study that provoke multi-layered thinking. A great one to share is the Junior Kindergarten (JK) unit that includes Chanukah.

Because the Chanukah unit follows their study of story of creation in the Torah, the children learn about the Chanukah “miracle” through the lens of creation. Inspired by Abraham Joshua Heschel’s philosophy that the relationship between God and people is a critical interaction, JK students meet

miracles as consequences of that interplay; God has a role, the Jewish people have a role. At Chanukah, the Maccabees and God worked together and the oil in the menorah lasted for eight days: a miracle. The four-year-old minds are grasping the abstract yet concrete idea that they themselves can work with God to create something amazing.

In the study unit, the children explore the questions: How did the Maccabees and God collaborate to create a miracle? What role did the Maccabees play in making the oil last for eight days? What role did God play? They apply the same framework to the forces of gravity and inertia in their science class.

They spin a dreidel (*sevivon*) and observe what happens. The teacher asks: What does God do to make the *sevivon* spin? God creates us with arms, hands, and fingers. What do we do? We use our arms, hands, and fingers to twirl the dreidel. The children then watch and consider how balls move: What does it mean to use my body to make a ball move? How did I get the ball to roll from one side of the room to the other? What happens when I push harder? They learn that a ball needs force to make it move because it has inertia; God created the world with inertia. If the ball is moving, its inertia keeps it moving unless it is disturbed by another force. The students investigate further using ramps and toy cars; the higher the ramp, the more work is needed from their arms, hands, and fingers to make the cars go up. Humans must use their bodies to change an object’s inertia if the object is to move.

The lesson extends to gravity; the dreidel always falls still as the spin subsides. The children experiment; they drop different materials from different heights and observe what happens to everything. Gravity, another force with which God created the world, always pulls things down. At Chanukah, we use our bodies to spin the dreidel, and God’s force of gravity pulls it down in the end.

When I was a child, I understood a miracle to be something that happens because God wants it to happen. I am happy that my children will understand the world in a more authentic way. Of course, their understanding will continue to develop as they mature, but they will be building from a foundational idea of human agency as planted in JK: Human beings have a role to play in making the world wondrous. This is exactly the creative tension that Parker Palmer calls a paradox. The JK teachers are showing the children that they need *chutzpah* and *humility*: They need to take an active role in the miracles around us, while remembering that nothing is done alone. We partner with God.

¹ Parker J. Palmer, *Healing the Heart of Democracy* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), p. 45.

² Sivan Zakai, “Israel Is Meant for Me”: Kindergarteners’ Conceptions of Israel,” *The Journal of Jewish Education*, Vol. 81, No. 1 (2015), pp. 21–22.

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The children learn that human beings play a role in making the world wondrous.



EMBRACING COMPLEXITY



The Elements of Creation in Grade 2

A COMPLEX CREATIVE PROCESS

BY JUDITH LEITNER

In Grade 2 we ask: What do we learn about creativity from the sequence of the days of creation and the connections between them? Which element of artistic practice does each day reveal? As artists, how might we emulate God's creative process?

To answer, we wonder what the beginning of an idea looks and feels like—how does it emerge and unfold. We think of God as an artist “just like us” and we set out to navigate the six days of God's creative process. We start with a large blank canvas and assume the mindset of artists illuminating a biblical text. Slowly and thoughtfully, we construct our vision. We layer day upon day, adding the new “elements” that are created for each.

We see that the practice of self-reflection appears as an important aspect of creative work; the words of the Torah describe what is being created but also reference thinking about process and technique. When the work of art is complete, God stands back to observe and reflect: “And God saw all that God had crafted, and behold, it was very good! And thus there was evening and there was morning—the sixth day” (Genesis 1:31).

As they reflect and plan, the children learn first to differentiate concepts from physical objects. They notice the use of light as both abstract and concrete; it is abstract when it divides “light” from “darkness” and concrete when it organizes the flow of time, dividing day from night, defining seasons and years. God says, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate day from night; they shall serve as signs for the set times—the days and years” (Genesis 1:14). The process of learning about distinctions includes the opportunity for students to see how an artist likes to classify and

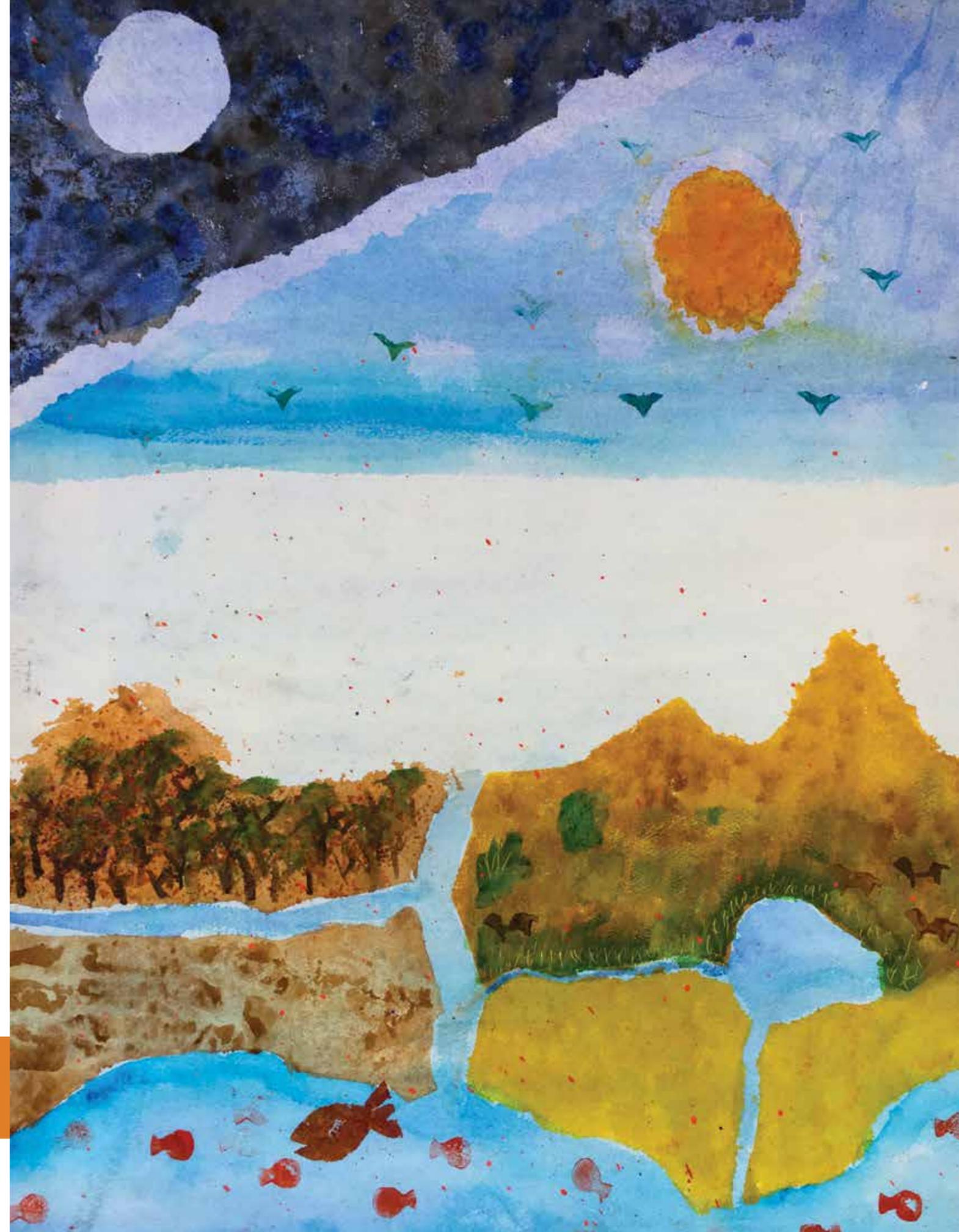
assign titles and names to work that has been accomplished; it is yet another way to make work one's own and communicate creative intention.

Creating art is always some kind of “self-portrait.” God declares, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Genesis 1:26). The creative process draws from what an artist knows, as well as what an artist observes.

As the days of creation follow on from one another, the students notice that creative ideas and designs instigate and perpetuate further ideas and designs. They see how creativity becomes a flow. Art begins with an empty space, a blank canvas, onto which ideas, materials, techniques, and working steps are envisioned. The artist builds the artwork step-by-step, in layers—imagining, exploring, crafting, standing back, reflecting, and fine-tuning. God makes artistic choices in a cumulative creative process over six days. Each day supports and makes the next step possible. First God makes an environment to hold all. The words of Genesis tell that the waters then brought forth swarms of creatures and birds; and that God commands the creatures and birds to increase their own numbers and fill the waters and the earth (Genesis 1:1–31).

The materials matter. Watercolour paint emphasizes the properties of water, an essential theme of the text. Students explore watercolour techniques that speak to those particular days. The paint colour can be diluted and shallow or deep and dark and each can imply a different message. Later, they use earth, otherwise known as ceramics, to create the first human from clay, as described by Genesis 2:7.

The following pages share the process the young artists pursue in mirroring creation as told by the Book of Genesis.



What do we learn about creativity from the sequence of the days and the connections between them?

Day 1

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ

When, at the beginning, as God was creating the heaven and the earth

וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם

the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אוֹר וַיְהִי־אוֹר

God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

וַיַּרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאוֹר כִּי־טוֹב וַיַּבְדֵּל אֱלֹהִים בֵּין הָאוֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ

God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. (Genesis 1:1–4)

ARTISTIC PROCESS: watercolour wash



Day 2

וַיַּעַשׂ אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הַרְקִיעַ וַיַּבְדֵּל בֵּין הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר מִתַּחַת לַרְקִיעַ וּבֵין הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר מֵעַל לַרְקִיעַ וַיְהִי־כֵן

God made the expanse, and it separated the water which was below the expanse from the water which was above the expanse.

And it was so. (Genesis 1:7)

ARTISTIC PROCESS: graded watercolour wash

Day 3

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יִקְוּוּ הַמַּיִם מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם אֶל־מְקוֹם אֶחָד וַתִּרְאָה הַיַּבְשָׁה וַיְהִי־כֵן

God said, "Let the water below the sky be gathered into one area, that the dry land may appear." And it was so.

וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים | לַיַּבְשָׁה אָרֶץ וּלְמִקְוֵה הַמַּיִם קָרָא יַמִּים וַיַּרְא אֱלֹהִים כִּי־טוֹב

God called the dry land Earth, and the gathering of waters He called Seas. And God saw that this was good.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים תִּדְשֵׂא הָאָרֶץ דְּשֵׂא עֵשֶׂב מְזֵרִיעַ זֶרַע עֵץ פְּרִי עֵשֶׂה פְּרִי לְמִינֹו אֲשֶׁר זֶרְעוֹ־בֹו עַל־הָאָרֶץ וַיְהִי־כֵן

And God said, "Let the earth sprout vegetation: seed-bearing plants, fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." And it was so.

וַתוֹצֵא הָאָרֶץ דְּשֵׂא עֵשֶׂב מְזֵרִיעַ זֶרַע לְמִינֵהוּ וְעֵץ עֹשֶׂה־פְּרִי אֲשֶׁר זֶרְעוֹ־בֹו לְמִינֵהוּ וַיַּרְא אֱלֹהִים כִּי־טוֹב

The earth brought forth vegetation: seed-bearing plants of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. (Genesis 1:9–12)

ARTISTIC PROCESS: drawing, masking, stippling wet-on-wet, subtractive technique: saran wrap on wet canvas, etching, dry brushing



Day 4

וַיַּעַשׂ אֱלֹהִים אֶת־שְׁנֵי הַגְּדֹלִים אֶת־הַמְּאֹר הַגָּדֹל לְמַשְׁלַת הַיּוֹם וְאֶת־הַמְּאֹר הַקָּטָן לְמַשְׁלַת הַלַּיְלָה וְאֵת הַכּוֹכָבִים

God made the two great lights, the greater light to dominate the day and the lesser light to dominate the night, and the stars.

וַיִּתֵּן אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים בְּרָקִיעַ הַשָּׁמַיִם לְהָאִיר עַל־הָאָרֶץ

And God set them in the expanse of the sky to shine upon the earth,

וּלְמַשֵּׁל בַּיּוֹם וּבַלַּיְלָה וּלְהַבְדִּיל בֵּין הָאוֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים כִּי־טוֹב

to dominate the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. (Genesis 1:16–18)

ARTISTIC PROCESS: drawing, masking, stippling wet-on-wet and wet-on-dry, salting



Day 5

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הַתַּיִמָּנוֹת הַגְּדֹלִים וְאֵת כָּל־נֶפֶשׁ הַחַיָּה | הַרְמֵשֶׁת אֲשֶׁר שָׂרְצוּ הַמַּיִם לְמִינֵיהֶם וְאֵת כָּל־עוֹף כָּנָף לְמִינֵיהוּ וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים כִּי־טוֹב

God created the great sea monsters, and all the living creatures of every kind that creep, which the waters brought forth in swarms, and all the winged birds of every kind. And God saw that this was good. (Genesis 1:21)

ARTISTIC PROCESS: stamping



Day 6

וַיַּעַשׂ אֱלֹהִים אֶת־חַיַּת הָאָרֶץ לְמִינָהּ וְאֶת־הַבְּהֵמָה לְמִינָהּ וְאֵת כָּל־רֶמֶשׂ הָאֲדָמָה לְמִינֵהוּ וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים כִּי־טוֹב

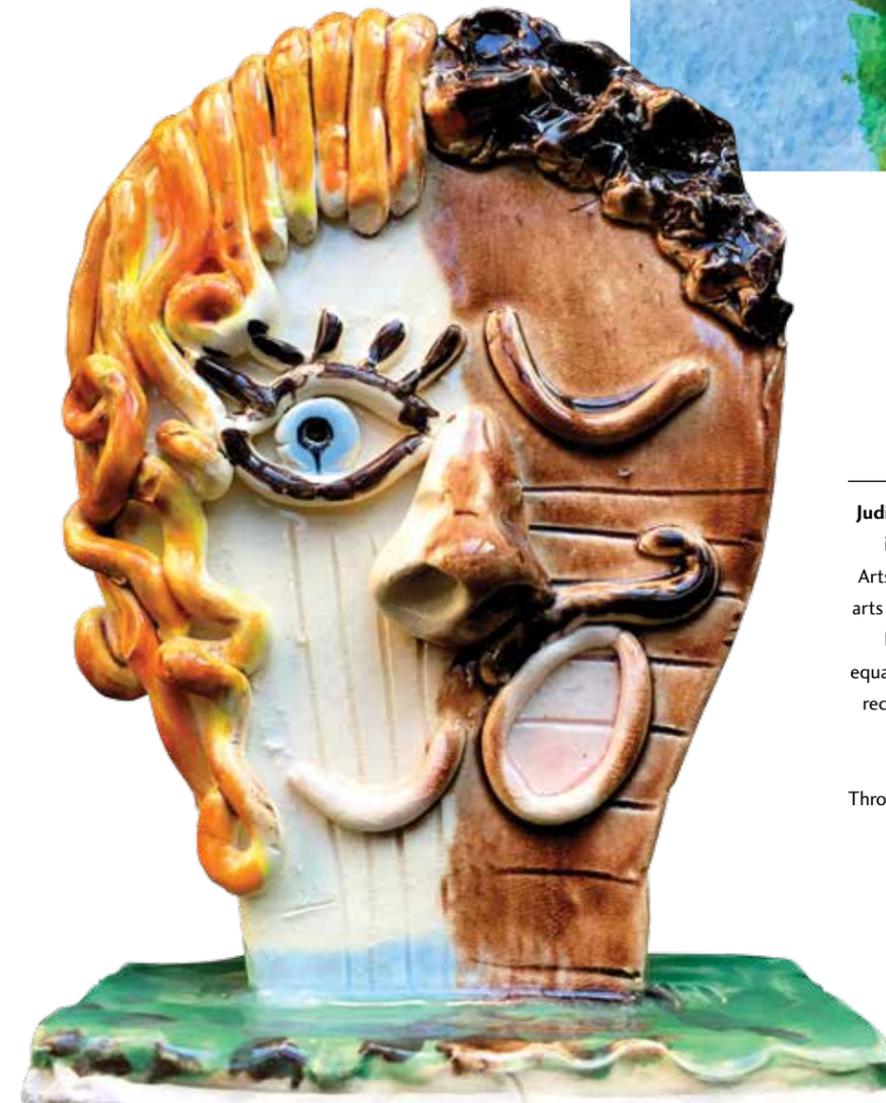
God made wild beasts of every kind and cattle of every kind, and all kinds of creeping things of the earth. And God saw that this was good. (Genesis 1:25)

ARTISTIC PROCESS: drawing and stamping

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים | אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם

And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. (Genesis 1:27)

ARTISTIC PROCESS: the art of ceramics: sculpting in low relief and glazing



Judith Leitner co-founded The Toronto Heschel School in 1996 and since then has served as the Director of Arts, team-designing and teaching the integrative Judaic arts curriculum. In 1991 she founded the Integrated Arts Programme at She'arim Hebrew Day School. Judith is equally passionate about documentary photography; her recent exhibitions include "Serene Passage: A Traveller's Prayer at Ground Zero, Madrid and Shanghai" (Arta Gallery, 2011 and Darchei Noam, 2014); "My Voice, Through My Lens" (MaRS Discovery District, June 2014), and "Embedded: Personal Identity through Job:19" (Contact Photography Festival, 2015).

Weaving Narratives

TIGHT SCRUTINY FOR EXPANSIVE INSIGHT

BY LISA RENDELY

“Follow the Drinking Gourd” is a simple song about following a road to freedom. A resonant, catchy tune. For the uninitiated, the song reminds us about the struggle for freedom. For slaves escaping the American South along the Underground Railroad, it provided codes for their journey. The drinking gourd, the song’s namesake, is the Big Dipper, seven stars grouped to outline a ladle with its handle pointing towards the North Star. Slaves used this beacon to direct them to freedom.

The simplicity of the symbol belies its complexity. Its secrets, sung by slaves, fooled overseers and plantation owners, who thought the slaves were subhuman, incapable of developing intricate support systems for their brethren’s escape.

With years of practise already behind them, Grade 5 students at The Toronto Heschel School are well versed in analyzing symbols, artifacts, and text for hidden meaning. Now, to explore the theme “From Slavery to Freedom,” they examine and compare Judaic and secular texts, searching for valuable information beneath surface words. They try to break codes embedded in text language, just as slaves sought to break the codes of oppression. They are primed to weave an emotionally complex narrative across a logistically complex set of content areas.

Students’ enthusiasm for “From Slavery to Freedom” shows in the seriousness with which they undertake the study. The rationale for saddling young learners with the responsibility of such a sophisticated curriculum reveals its merit; the complicated nature of the task is precisely why it works so well. Students feel challenged but also they feel entrusted, and therefore respected, to work through heavy ideas and emotions as individuals and as a team. Grade 5 students rise to the occasion; they sink their teeth into complex ideas and surpass their own expectations.

Reading the Passover story as detectives looking for clues, they search the text for “knots,” or *kesharim*: moments of enslavement, despair, or loss of humanity. Such moments might include Moshe watching Hebrews being whipped by a taskmaster, or Pharaoh hardening his heart and denying freedom after each escalating plague.

Students also explore the text for “loops,” or *lula’ot*: moments of hope, humanity, or possibility. Each small circumstance is a loosening, a crack that opens the door to freedom,

if ever so slightly: Miriam, Yocheved, and the midwives save Moshe from the Nile; Moshe notices and approaches a burning bush; slaves run under cover of night with unleavened bread.

The students recognize the significance of each of these moments and understand how events that are marginal, maybe scarcely visible, can lead to monumental change. Had Moshe continued to tend his sheep and not investigate a flaming bush that did not burn, he would not have become the leader of the Jewish people, the beacon to guide them out of slavery. The North Star. The Drinking Gourd.

Working with their Chumash teacher, the students isolate passages in *Sefer Shemot* (the Book of Exodus) that pinpoint moments of restriction and opportunities for freedom. With their art teacher, they learn the art of macramé as a playful medium to illustrate—metaphorically—these significant moments. Each bit of text is ascribed a meaning and either a macramé knot or loop. The playful nature of working with macramé assumes a serious tone as students weave their ropes into 3D sculptures, intertwining knots, loops, and words of text thoughtfully. The knots, loops, and stitches illustrate enslavement and liberation, moments of intense struggle or slight loosening in the fabric of indenture. Chosen words of text also weave through the artwork in an abstract narration of the Exodus as the configuration or sequence creates a network of passages. The multi-step process requires the Grade 5 children to produce a symbolic representation of a complex set of ideas.

To work as artists like this—with defined vocabulary and minimal materials—generates intense class debate about whether a specific macramé stitch should represent a knot or a loop. The attribution process involves the creative application of sophisticated knowledge and understanding. Students observe that a knot, a restriction, loosened ever so slightly, can become a loop, an opening. They notice that the reverse is also true; an opening can tighten back if not acted on with urgency. Macramé offers a tactile way to navigate, break, or increase the razor-thin tension between freedom and oppression.

The students are reading Barbara Smucker’s novel *Underground to Canada*, and searching for the codes and symbols used by Julilly, a 13-year-old slave, and her friends to

escape the American South. Reading closely, students notice moments of tension and opportunity beneath the storyline and attune to passwords, secret codes, and opportunities that systematically advance freedom. They delve further into text analysis and seek parallels with the Book of Exodus.

Their years of interdisciplinary thinking help them consider the two narratives in concert; they are adept at integrating complex notions. They craft a Seder Plate for Julilly and adorn it with touchpoints from her narrative that reflect her slavery, escape, and freedom. They pick up on key details in Julilly’s story, choosing symbols with conviction and passion, and supporting their choices with quotes from Exodus and the novel, eager to justify their multi-layered decisions. Their creations mirror the five symbols of the Passover Seder plate that depict the Israelites’ Exodus: bitter herbs for hardship, *charoset* for mortar made by slaves; a Pascal offering remembering the doorposts of safety; an egg for rebirth; and a green vegetable for renewal.

Analyzing symbols sensitizes students to notice knots and loops in their own lives. They attune to the nuances of racism and “othering,” to codes that keep people down, and to small moments that open possibilities for change.

That Grade 5 students have the capacity to recognize, analyze, and connect symbols demonstrates their thorough understanding of what a symbol inherently is: a visible sign of something invisible. The sophistication of thought required to identify the components of meaning in a simple object, word, or location validates the years of text study and meaning-making that they experience at Toronto Heschel. When is a star more than a shining beacon in the sky? When it becomes a compass that guides to freedom. When is a quilt more than a collage of scraps? When it marks a safe space or depicts an arrow pointing the way. When is a candle in the window more than a way to light a room? When it’s in a window of a station house along the Underground Railroad. Meaning within a symbol makes something from nothing. The capacity to identify meaning marks students’ learning.

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 art and design in her daily classroom teaching.

Fifth graders rise to the occasion; they sink their teeth into complex ideas and surpass their own expectations.

If every Jewish person throughout time was present at Mount Sinai watching the moment of revelation, then many different points of view comprise our shared covenant. So goes a well-known and mystical rabbinic teaching (Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 146a).

Inspired by this, Grade 5 students at The Toronto Heschel School engage in a multi-faceted, semester-long program that explores interactions between individuals and collectives. The students learn that at Mount Sinai, revelation was a collective experience with unique implications for each individual. In their civics class, students discover the inverse, that through democratic discussion and decision-making individual voices have implications for the collective. In co-ordinated language arts, visual arts, and social science lessons, the students

1. learn the meaning and function of metaphor, which is essential to literary studies but also helps discussion about covenant, given that the children live in 2019 and not near a desert;
2. collaborate to make a large painted mural that is then cut into individual pieces for each student to elaborate on before recombining the sections into one new work of art; and
3. study the rights of children as set out in various international charters, the societal responsibilities of civic engagement, and the democratic process to manage multiple perspectives.

Learning this way is elemental to the pluralistic mission of The Toronto Heschel School. The school's *Parent Handbook* reads:

The school supports Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's concern for the spiritual quality of human relations and his promotion of unity of the Jewish people. The school's philosophy is based on religious

pluralism, understanding, and mutual respect. (<http://torontoheschel.org>)

Pluralism is a phrase that is often used but less often understood. Sometimes it is used superficially to describe a single collection of various people; at other times it references that a diverse group of people accepts a multiplicity of beliefs or traditions. The Toronto Heschel School identifies with pluralism not as a way to describe that there are different members in its community, but to expose how these members are intended to work as a whole and the Sinai-like value this offers. As in the Grade 5 mural, individual pieces of the school community interact to create a new whole.

At a Junior High parent orientation, Dana Ezer, a Grade 8 teacher, spoke about the pluralistic nature of The Toronto Heschel School. When I was speaking with her later, she laid out for me the challenges and opportunities that pluralism imports into the school community. She explained that an authentic pluralistic environment is one where there are real departures from sameness within the group, yet the unique particularity of each individual is essential to the whole, and the collective is intentionally fashioned to benefit from this tension.

Junior High is a particularly sensitive age for students; highlighting individual differences is socially and personally awkward. Ezer says that this tense time in maturing students' development is exactly when the school asks them to consider and discover value in others. Noticing other people helps students evaluate and know themselves.

Students assess and explore how Judaism feels to them. They learn the meaning of Jewish beliefs and practices, and have the chance to give voice to their personal perspectives. By doing this, the students develop compassion and flexibility, and begin to get a sense of what mutuality can mean. They get comfortable in the space of "I don't know" and with the idea that their beliefs do not need to be fully formed. In

Pluralism in Action

BY DVORA GOODMAN

fact, they learn that their attitudes will continue to change as they move forward in life.

In practice, collective spirit and personal choice sometimes conflict. Such is life. The school has met this challenge by evolving a *minhag hamakom* (custom of the place) that developed to guide the religious life of the school and is uniquely characteristic of the school's particular needs. The custom of the place manages many possibilities and retains respect for individual choices; the statement is: "This is how we do it here." The school finds that having a common culture is integral to a sense of shared community.

Prayer services are a good example. The whole Junior High attends an egalitarian community prayer service one day per week. On the four other weekdays, the students rotate through different services with different *hashkofot* (religious orientations). Individual students may experience a little discomfort in practising this *minhag hamakom*, but it's something that everyone does in order to have the benefit of a weekly communal practice. The purpose of this practice is to acclimatize students to the discomfort of divergent customs, to accustom them to notice commonalities and accept differences.

Once the Grade 8 students have learned to mediate religious differences in their own school, they look outwards and observe practices in a mosque, church, and Buddhist temple. There they speak with their peers and experience the sense of enlightenment that comes when differences are transcended: What seems so strange may not be that far afield. The overture is meaningful and the social interaction is authentic because the Grade 8 class has come through a four-year focus on individuality, peer collaboration, and respectful debate. It began when they learned in Grade 5 that "we were all at Sinai."

Dvora Goodman is Coordinator of The Lola Stein Institute. She has worked in a variety of Jewish educational settings and is a Toronto Heschel School parent.

The school community works as a whole and reaps the Sinai-like value this offers.

OUR
SAGES
TELL
US



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 a grandmother. In 1996 she co-founded The Toronto Heschel School and retired as Head of School in 2014.

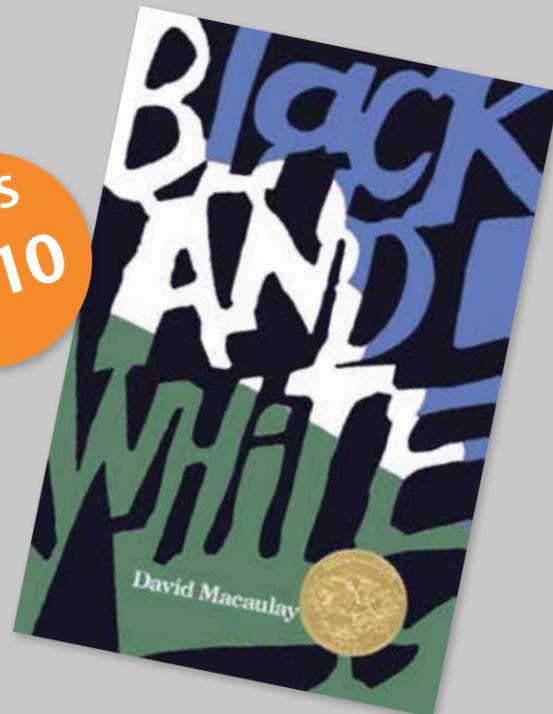
Tziporah Cohen is a psychiatrist with an MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults and is a Toronto Heschel mom.



AGES
4-7

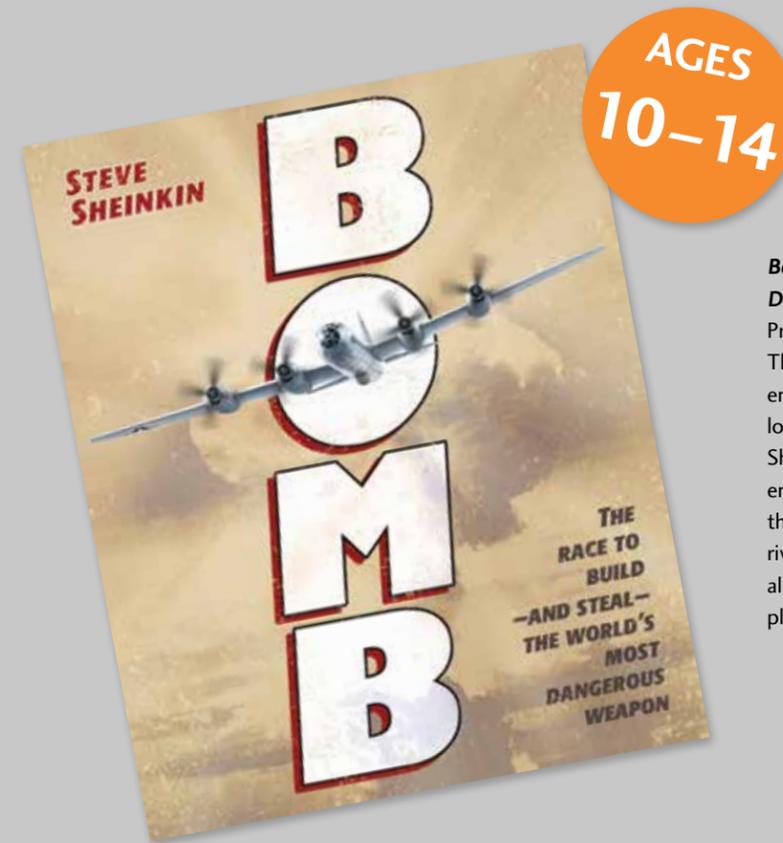
Bitter and Sweet by Sandra V. Feder and illustrated by Krysten Brooker (Groundwood Books, 2018) Hannah is moving, leaving the house, neighbourhood, and friends she loves. Her grandma tells her about her experience leaving the old country, “Definitely some bitter, but even more sweet.” Hannah, seeing only the bitter, thinks her grandma must be wrong. Only when she meets her new neighbour, Maya, does Hannah learn the real lesson in Grandma’s words, that you must add the sweetness yourself. *Bitter and Sweet* beautifully illustrates that feelings, like life, are complex, and that bitter and sweet are two sides of the same coin.

AGES
6-10



Black and White written and illustrated by David Macaulay (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1990)

While the title of this classic Caldecott Medal-winning picture book is simple, the form and content are anything but. With each double page divided into four quadrants, is it a story about a boy’s first train ride alone or a story about an escaped convict? A tale about parents acting strangely or about the shenanigans of bored passengers waiting for their train? Four stories or one? Macaulay challenges the reader to puzzle out the relationship between the various threads. New details will emerge with every read.

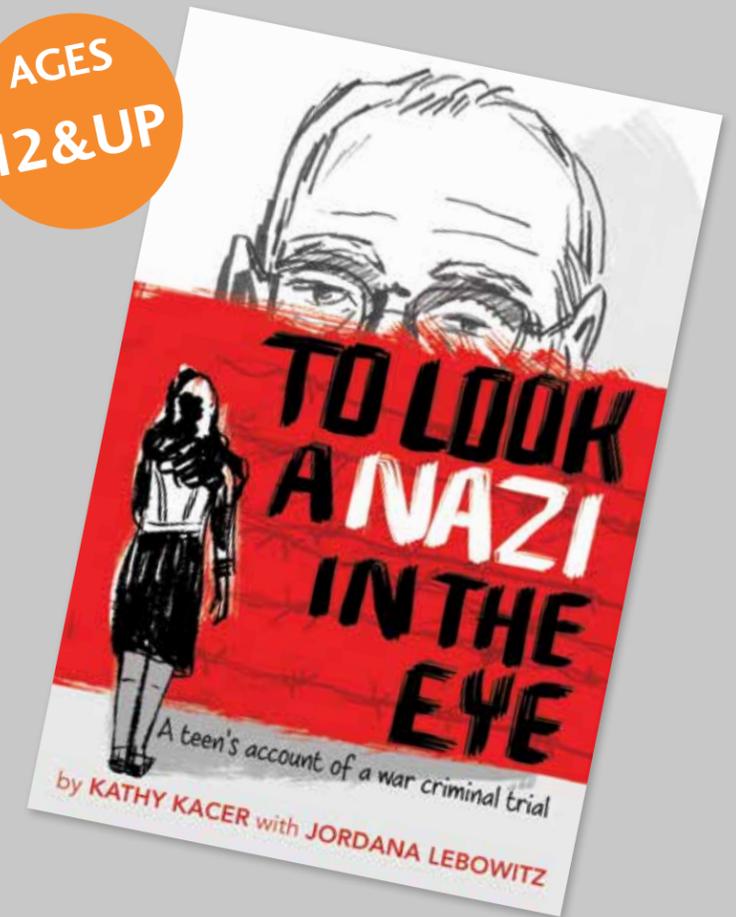


AGES
10-14

Bomb: The Race to Build—and Steal—the World’s Most Dangerous Weapon by Steve Sheinkin (Roaring Brook Press, 2012)

The use of the atomic bomb against Japan led to the end of World War II and set off what became a decades-long arms race between the United States and Russia. Sheinkin captures the multi-faceted history—the science, the politics, the espionage, and the ethics—behind this extraordinary yet horrifying achievement. *Bomb* is a riveting non-fiction account that reads like a spy thriller, all the while trusting the reader to understand the complication behind the world’s most destructive weapon.

AGES
12&UP



To Look a Nazi in the Eye: A Teen’s Account of a War Criminal Trial by Kathy Kacer with Jordana Lebowitz (Second Story Press, 2017)

Excitement. Nervousness. Pride. Confusion. These are just a few of the swirling and tangled feelings experienced by Jordana Lebowitz as she travelled to Germany in 2015 to witness the trial of Oskar Groening, the bookkeeper of Auschwitz. Could this frail elderly man, who reminded Jordana of her grandfather, really have been complicit in the deaths of more than 300,000 Jews? If he was guilty, was it too late to prosecute? Listening to the testimonies of survivors and of Groening, Jordana comes to realize that it is never too late for the truth to come out. This true account will stimulate students to consider these issues and the relevant, pressing need to remember this horrendous history.



Goodnight Mush

WHAT DOES A PICTURE BOOK DO?

BY AVA KWINTER

In my house we have at least five copies of *Goodnight Moon*. There is my mother's 1947 hardcover edition, fragile, wrapped in tissue paper in the closet; my own '70s-era paperback, so badly creased and held together by old and brittle scotch tape; and several *Goodnight Moon* board books because people kept gifting them to us when our babies were born, often with the apology, "I'm sure you already have this, but you can always use another..."

It's as if *Goodnight Moons*, like bottle sterilizers and musical mobiles, are indispensable to the modern nursery. And, of course, we did read *Goodnight Moon* to our babies from practically Day One because it seemed the right thing to do. Although, to be honest, it has always seemed a bit opaque and aloof to me, there is no question that *Goodnight Moon* projects the authoritative aura of a "Classic Book," and whatever else it might be saying, its most accessible message is that if you love your children and want the best life for them, then you ought to read them *Goodnight Moon*: a quality literary experience guaranteed.

But why is *Goodnight Moon*—first published in 1947 by Harper and Brothers, written by Margaret Wise Brown and illustrated by Clement Hurd—such a revered canonical picture book? What makes it so much better than others? After all, as baffled parents point out, it doesn't even have a story. Some of the end words, like moon and room, don't rhyme properly. The colours are weird, garish. What's the big deal about this book?

Or, to put it another way, what is the task of a picture book? While a story book usually contains illustrations of the plot, the pictures are not essential and the story will make sense without them; the words impel readers to find out what happens. Picture books make meaning in an entirely different way. So we read them in a completely different way too.

In *Words About Pictures*, an extensive study of the genre of picture books, Perry Nodelman explains that picture books speak in two distinct voices at the same time. The verbal, or written, text is independent of the visual, or picture, text. Both convey information, but while the visual and verbal narratives may share a page, *they do not say the same thing*.¹

The integrity of a picture book depends as much on its words as its pictures. When the words and pictures diverge, the picture book reaches its most expressive potential. Michael Dirda writes,

The relationship between words and pictures is one of tension and irony; each affects the other; and the finest picture books are those with the maximum difference between visual and verbal...[so that] the words can change the meaning of a picture and more surprisingly, [a] picture can change the meaning of words.²

It is precisely this simultaneity of narratives—Brown's words and Hurd's pictures combining to make divergent multiple meanings—that elevates *Goodnight Moon* to its iconic status.

Many readers will have the first few pages, if not the whole book, committed to memory, but in case it's been a while, here's a prompt:

In the great green room
There was a telephone
And a red balloon
And a picture of—
The cow jumping over the moon³

The words are adamantly *visual*. We see two colours and a picture; the text emphasizes the act of looking. There are

no active verbs in the book and so its words do not convey any sense of movement. The scene is absolutely still. Even the cow, at the moment of jumping, is frozen, suspended in air. The telephone, rich with communicative potential, is silent. Later in the book, mittens allude to a world outside the green room, to weather and activity and going somewhere, but here they are inanimate.

Many have remarked on the success of *Goodnight Moon* as a bedtime story precisely because of its stillness. The chanting repetition is soothing, sleep-inducing. *Goodnight Moon* does not need a story because it uses language for a completely different purpose; it uses language as sound. A hint to this purpose is the old lady's quiet and quieting whisper, "Hush." Hush is onomatopoeic—pure sound approaching meaninglessness. This is language striving to become music. And the rhyming pair to hush is mush: food reduced to essence, like the audible hush.

Where Brown's text is characterized by stillness, Hurd's illustrations bustle with movement. The darting mouse, occupying a different spot in each picture, mimics the path of the readers' eyes scanning the pages; the scampering kittens; the restless bunny who is emphatically not lying quietly in bed—all challenge the verbal text's version of this room as static. As much as the words reject the forward momentum of a conventional story, the pictures dramatize the passage of time. There are not one but two clocks in the room, and, as the pages progress, the hands circle the clock to mark the passing of an hour.

Two clocks, two kittens, two bunnies, two parts of the narrative structure; the hush and the mush; *Goodnight Moon* is a book of doubles, mirrors, reflections, echoes. There are the two pairs of double OO's in the title, *Goodnight Moon*, each a moon reflecting itself over and over again throughout the words and pictures. Symbols proliferate: The moon in the

sky is another clock, marking time as it rises in the night. This celestial moon, perhaps the moon of the title, reappears across the nursery in the sharp white slice in the picture of the jumping cow, as a rhyming round red balloon, and two glowing white clocks. The very walls create an echo chamber with a second cow jumping over the moon hanging on the wall in the picture of bears sitting on chairs and a second Margaret Wise Brown book, *The Runaway Bunny*, hanging on another wall.

So why examine *Goodnight Moon*? Will we read it differently now that we have examined how its symbols and structure make meaning? Not likely. Although children won't consciously understand how this book explores sophisticated, avant-garde ideas of aesthetics and poetry, nonetheless there is value in exposing children to complex ideas. A book like *Goodnight Moon* demands more participation, more active thought, more dialogue between children and parents than a book without these kinds of layers. And that is why we keep reading a book like *Goodnight Moon*, even when we aren't really sure what it's about or even if we like it; and that is why it keeps proliferating in our houses, passed down from parent to child, from family to family.

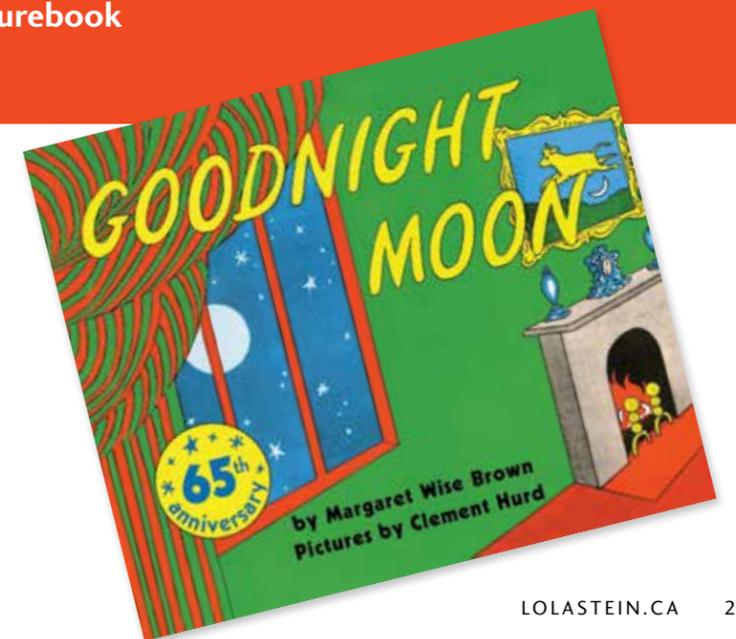
1 Perry Nodelman, *Words About Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1990).

2 Michael Dirda, "How to Read a Picture Book," *The Washington Post*, May 4, 1989, retrieved November 15, 2018, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/entertainment/books/1989/05/14/how-to-read-a-picture-book/eb0dd57f-6955-4ce5-9fff-ab0bc0dca41f/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.9359783eb9f0

3 This quotation is ostensibly pages 1 to 3, although *Goodnight Moon* does not number its pages. This absence of pagination, which can be seen as a refusal to locate the reader within the book, produces a sense of disorientation in the reader and contributes to the trance-like, soporific quality of the text.

Ava Kwinter studied English Literature at McGill, Queens, and Ottawa. She has a daughter and two sons at The Toronto Heschel School.

When words and pictures diverge, a picturebook reaches its most expressive potential.





Hope for a New Society

BY MICHELLE SHULMAN

Last summer, I visited the kibbutz where I spent summers as a teenager. Walking through the once-socialist enclave, I was intrigued at how this corner of idealism had transformed into a neighbourhood almost like any other. As I walked by the pool, I saw families from the nearby Arab village enjoying cool relief on this stifling day. At first I thought it was wonderful to see the two communities, Jewish and Arab, integrating and having fun together, but then, looking more closely, I saw that no kibbutz members were there. The time was reserved for their Arab neighbours. While many transformations had occurred, the Jewish and Arab neighbours still lived completely separate from each other.

The Proclamation of Independence of the State of Israel provides for a Jewish homeland that guarantees “complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex.”¹ I began to wonder how Israel could ever become the shared society imagined by its founders if Jews and Arabs in the Galilee shop in each other’s stores and swim in each other’s pools but never play together, break bread together, or get to know each other.

As someone who is passionate about education that models the people we want our children to become, I wondered why Israel was again raising a generation of students who only practise separateness during their years at school. In Israel, there are four streams of school: Jewish secular, Jewish national Zionist, Jewish ultra-orthodox, and Arab, each operating separately in its own silo. Each teaches its own great tradition of justice, equality, and fairness, but students go home and find that these values are not at play in their

neighbourhoods. In fact, the neighbourhoods are not at all in play with each other.

Typically, Jewish children in Israel grow up without Arab friendships, and Arab children never play with Jewish friends. It seems to me that educating Israeli children in social and religious silos can only nurture students who grow up not knowing, and perhaps even fearing, the “other.” It’s hard to expect them to respect and appreciate their peers across Israeli society.

As parents, we know that if we are not walking the walk, the talk will not cut it. To raise children capable of taking on complex challenges, we must empower and train them from a young age to think openly, deeply, and broadly about the many different ways there are to approach differences, dilemmas, and complications. They have to embrace, not fear, complexity, and they will need practise.

Since 1998, Hand in Hand educators have walked the talk of the just society that Israel’s founders imagined. Hand in Hand educates Israeli children from all communities, all cultures, and all religions together. Orthodox, secular, Ashkenazi, Sephardic, and Ethiopian Jewish students attend school with Christians, Muslims, Druze Arabs, and everyone in between. The children grow up together, form friendships on the field and in the lab, appreciate their differences and value their similarities. They learn to speak each other’s languages, listen to one another’s stories, and still strengthen and love their own identities.

Hand in Hand schools model what Israeli society could be if all citizens could know and understand one another.

No one at Hand in Hand pretends that integrating children will solve the geopolitical challenges of the day, but they do believe that integration lays the foundation for a shared society. Fully aware that this is not a simple undertaking, Hand in Hand tackles the divide with deep thought and realistic expectations of the hurdles to be faced by educators, families, and children who choose this path.

The real work happening in the six Hand in Hand schools across Israel today is the graduation of young adults who feel secure in their identities, face Israel in its full complexity, and possess the compassion, courage, and skill to speak with and know the others around them. Each classroom has a Jewish teacher who speaks to students in Hebrew and an Arab teacher who speaks to them in Arabic. Together they teach science and math, history and geography, and the students seamlessly switch between languages.

But language is only the beginning. Each teacher represents a people with a culture, religious faith, and history. While all teachers and students are citizens of Israel, their communities have contradictory narratives of ancient and modern history, including the story of the founding of the state; it’s even complicated to mark civic holidays together. Students tackle questions of identity and community that most Israeli adults have never dared to raise, never mind discuss. Hand in Hand students are owning their identities; they are building understanding and respect through listening to and learning from each other, laying the foundation of a shared society.

I asked Noa Yammer of Hand in Hand how the children can become versed and secure in their own identities, religions, cultures, and traditions while they are learning to respect and value those of their classmates. She explained that the children divide for Religious and Cultural Studies and also present their own faiths and particular ways to the undivided class. Teachers encourage all students to be vocal and curious, and to ask questions of the others.

And how do the teachers manage all of this in the classroom? There is certainly no university track for delivering

this kind of education. Teachers receive ongoing professional development at the school and learn from the experience of years past. They too need to create a shared community. Co-teachers in a classroom may have grown up minutes from one another in Kfar Saba and Tira but, more likely than not, their paths never crossed. Living their ideals and inspiring students can often be challenged by political events happening in real time in the country, sometimes even on their way into work.

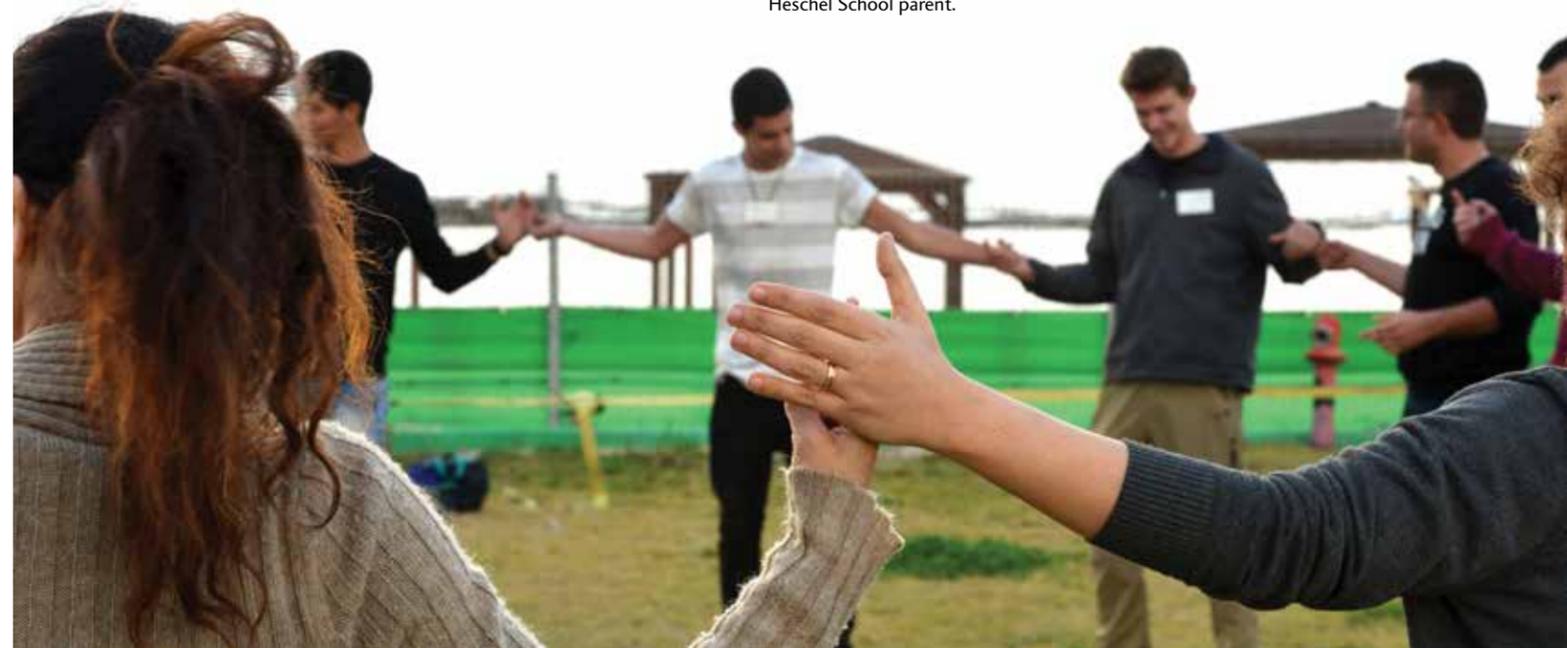
The complexity of life in Israel pervades children’s lives. When students leave campus at the day’s end, they re-enter a society that does not mirror their school community. As such, school founders realized that, in order to take real steps towards achieving a shared society, the school had to develop an invested sense of community among school parents and families.

Mohamad Marzouk, the Director of Community at Hand in Hand, grew up in an Arab village without knowing Jewish children. At university, he became interested in Arab–Jewish encounters and spent 20 years advancing Palestinian–Israeli dialogue by bringing together groups of politicians, teachers, and university students. Today, he is the force behind community building at Hand in Hand. In Mohamad’s model, the parents celebrate, play sports, tend community gardens, and socialize together. When current events test their cohesion, they sit and dialogue, sharing their real life concerns and finding a way through together. It is an enormous commitment.

There are now Hand in Hand schools in Jerusalem, Wadi Ara, the Galilee, Jaffa, Haifa, and Tira-Kfar Saba. Fifteen more are planned in the next decade. As graduates integrate into society and begin to build the Israel of tomorrow, may they fulfill the dream of the authors of the Proclamation of Independence.

¹ www.knesset.gov.il/docs/eng/megilat_eng.htm

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We speak in definitive one-liners, even in the complex endeavour of raising children.

I am noticing a trend in how we communicate with one another, and I feel it may be affecting how we see and think about ourselves, and how our children see and think about themselves. Perhaps it's the combined effect of living in a society that discerns goods in the marketplace through branding and sound "bytes," labels and slogans. Our culture pushes us to speak in definitive one-liners even in the complex endeavour of raising children, with all the intricacies and ambiguities that raising children involves.

The development of child identity is multifactorial and subtle; recognizing this complexity means accepting the layers and mysteries that comprise each child. Attempts to simplify child identity are counterproductive, but I find myself watching this tendency grow. I worry that we are trapping our kids in frames and definitions that may harm their development. We talk about them casually and in loose terms. Sometimes we forget that they are listening and that what we intend a communication to mean is immaterial to the ears that hear it.

Increasingly, we describe ourselves and our children in all-encompassing, simplified statements that sound factual and feel powerful. They may be legitimately descriptive while only partially accurate. Listen and you might hear: "My daughter is painfully shy"; "My son is uncontrollable"; "She's overwhelmed"; "He has anger issues." Teenagers sport diagnostic badges such as "I'm depressed" or "I have anxiety." Sadly, these labels and snapshots feed the kind of branding that wipes out other important aspects of the child's character.

These sound "bytes" are especially concerning when they use the language of psychological diagnosis. The purpose of a diagnosis is to create a shorthand for doctors as they orient their observations in a certain direction. Unfortunately, even professional diagnoses sometimes lose sight of the whole child and become a full narrative or a limiting factor. For example, a boy diagnosed with

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) initially feels relieved to have helpful resources made available to him, but he may later feel constricted if ADHD becomes his identity statement and all his behaviours get attributed to the ADHD diagnosis.

For a diagnosis to be accurate, clusters of symptoms must persist through a specified period of time, and across settings. When we

analyze our children's behaviours as they play with others, it's true that we might notice common attributes. However, shared characteristics do not tell the story of an individual child. Even professionals, let alone untrained parents, must be careful not to distill their understanding of a particular child to match organized criteria.

As parents, we seem to crave certainty, and so we streamline, we paraphrase, we dumb down. It's so easy to use a one-liner and then look for evidence: "He's not creative"; "She's not athletic"; "He's bad at math"; "She's afraid of new things." Our children are listening and watching and I believe that their behaviours grow where our attention goes.

When we label our child as angry, we are cultivating a very particular process of self-definition inside the child. First we name a behaviour as anger and use the label as an explanation to others. Then, because we have pointed it out to others, the child "notices" that she is angry and anger becomes an attribute in her developing identity. In the meantime, we may stop noticing when she is not angry, but not call attention to her less angry behaviours. Anger remains installed integrally as a character theme in our child's personal story.

Concision in describing our children has harmful repercussions. Shorthand lends itself to dichotomous thinking. When we say "My child is not musical," we offer one choice to the listening child: "Am I musical?" or "Am I not musical?" The full range of skills in between disappears. Binary thinking hurts a child's developing sense of self because it presupposes that we live with stark alternatives, in black or white; this limited perspective on available possibilities curtails a struggling child's motivation to succeed. A Grade 4 student may be frustrated by his math homework and hear his parent say, "He takes after me; I was terrible at math." The repeat creates a cozy generational story, seemingly benign, but, in fact, malignant. How does this child develop confidence as a math learner? Is his math progress now self-defining, as he chooses either to be like his dad or to learn math? If a certain skill does not come easily and he thinks in zero sum alternatives, can he ever fulfill his potential, or does feeling fated to be like Dad (or Mom) become a self-fulfilling prophecy?

We must somehow remember that our language reflects who we are and who our children become. When we think and speak in labels and one-liners, where is our commitment

BEHAVIOUR GROWS WHERE ATTENTION GOES

BY JASMINE ELIAV

to the whole? Thinking in shorthand is a kind of fragmentation and it raises the question of whether a piecemeal approach skews our interpretation of the whole child. For me, the complexity of the whole child is profound. Bit-by-bit definitions cannot work. What we should rather do is provide ample free space for our children's evolving senses of self to blossom.

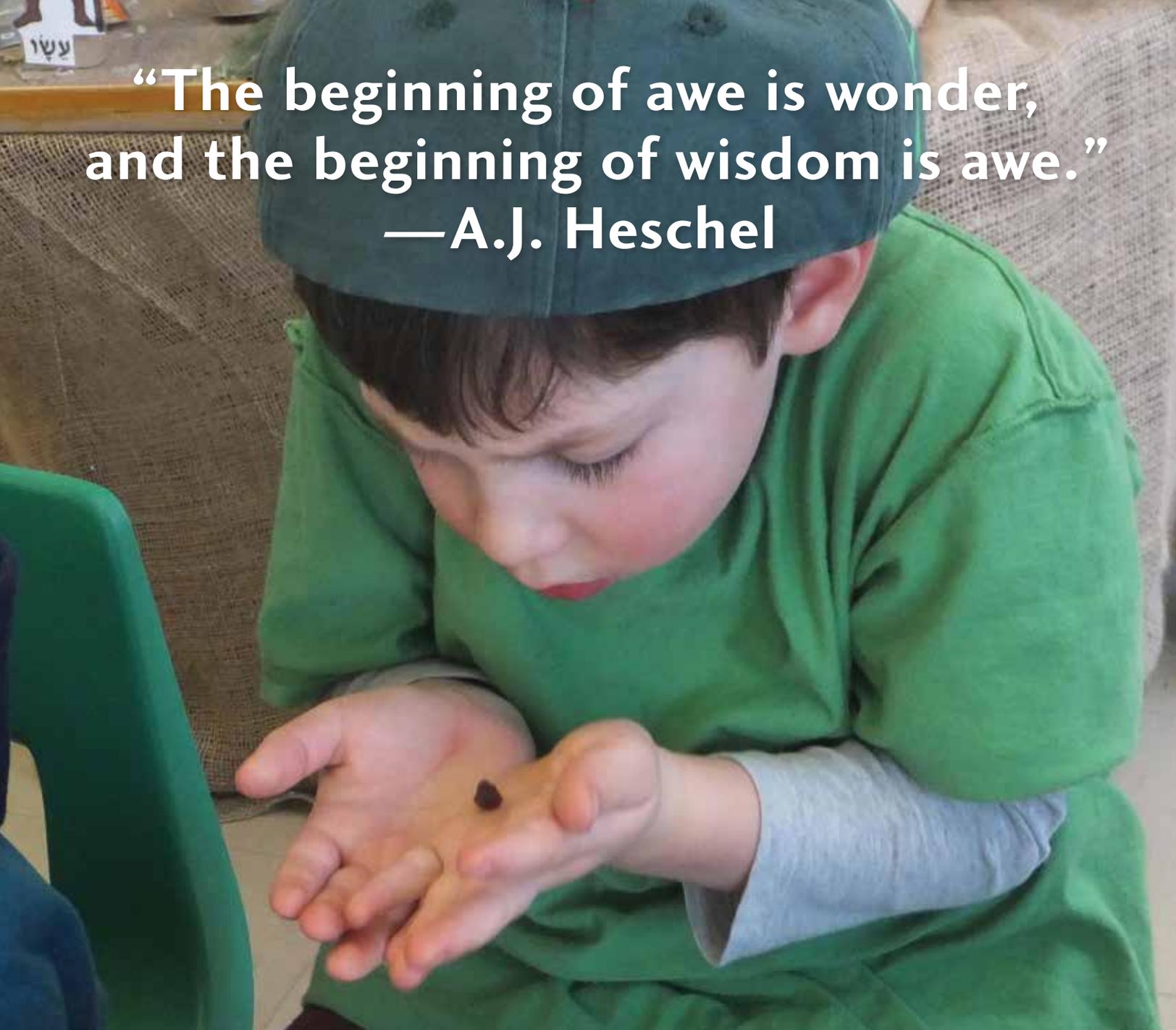
Think of a child who might be struggling with something—perhaps bickering with siblings—and try to remember when this friction began. Ask yourself, What story is the child carrying around and how does it affect her relationships? Notice how often you mention this struggle and how many other of her attributes you mention. Then consider whether you are allowing her opportunities to shift the scenario. In therapy, I may ask caregivers to list their child's struggles. I might hear back that the child is unmotivated, can't focus, or picks fights. Then I ask how often the caregivers include these descriptions when speaking with the child, noting that this can leave both parent and child feeling stuck and frustrated.

In truth, the goal is to cultivate the opposite of "name that struggle." We must identify what we hope to see in our children and then notice and acknowledge when they are on their game. This is not simply a recommendation for positive reinforcement; the goal is to coach our children as they write their own stories.

Metaphorically speaking, children need a wide vocabulary and good grasp of grammar in order to compose their personal narrative. As parents we can provide them with the words for fluid self-perception, giving them options for who they see themselves to be at this moment and the next. We can relish the intricate details of everything about them and role-model a behavioural system and structure that has many different aspects and possibilities. We can deliver the message to our children that each of us is a complex, changeable being who thrives on love and understanding. Through these kinds of positive self-concepts, they will grow far beyond what we can imagine today.

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“The beginning of awe is wonder,
and the beginning of wisdom is awe.”
—A.J. Heschel



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