



# think

THE LOLA STEIN INSTITUTE JOURNAL

ISSUE #8 FALL 2010

inside this issue:

## DEMOCRACY, RABBINIC DEBATE AND HOLINESS

PG 10

## COGNITIVE TRANSFORMATION AT AGE FIVE

PG 12

## TWO DENOMINATIONS: ONE SCHOOL

PG 20

## TEACHERS AS LEARNERS

PG 14

## SOPHISTICATED PARENTS ASK QUESTIONS

PG 16

## MISSION CONTROL GAIL BAKER

### RESPONSIVE LEARNING: BEYOND THE BELLS & WHISTLES

Recently, in a store selling "educational" books, games and software for children, a child of five or six years attracted my attention. He was completely absorbed in a computer activity.

It was a program designed to teach young ones to read. Lights flashed, letters danced and sound effects roared out of the letter "B!" The scene reminded me of a vital distinction in the ways schools offer education.

I wondered if the computer's lights and noises were training the little boy's mind to pay attention only to the avalanche of sound and movement. The child was reacting to outside stimuli. What will happen when he has to make sense of the printed word? Will he comfortably find entertainment using his imagination without flashing light and colour? Do electronic toys with their bells and lights affect our children's learning habits? Does this matter?

It does matter if we want our children to think for themselves, if we want our children to develop their inner resources, master their personal responses and not be controlled physically or intellectually by their surroundings. We do not want our children to react automatically to outside influences.

**We do not want our children to react  
automatically to outside influences.**

So we ask, "What are these 'inner resources' that children should develop?" Linda Lantieri and Daniel Goleman believe that cultivation of inner resilience is the most important part of a child's education. (See Lantieri and Goleman, *Building Emotional Intelligence*, 2008).

continued on page 3

# think TABLE OF CONTENTS



## COLUMNS

- PAGE 1&3 **RESPONSIVE LEARNING** BY GAIL BAKER  
BEYOND THE BELLS AND WHISTLES
- PAGE 2 **TABLE OF CONTENTS & CONTRIBUTORS**
- PAGE 4 **THINKING THINGS THROUGH** BY PAM MEDJUCK STEIN
- PAGE 5 **MEET JUDITH LEITNER**
- PAGE 6&7 **MIDDOT, MUSSAR & MINDFULNESS** BY GREG BEILES  
JEWISH THINKING PART THREE
- PAGE 8&9 **CULTIVATING LEARNING IN THE TEACHING GARDEN** BY ELANA SEGAL

## FEATURED ARTICLES

- PAGE 10&11 **TALKING FACE TO FACE** BY ELI SAVAGE  
JUNIOR HIGH CIVICS PURSUE DEMOCRACY
- PAGE 12&13 **THINKING AND THOUGHTFUL AT FIVE** BY LAINIE FILKOW  
TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING IN SENIOR KINDERGARDEN
- PAGE 14&15 **TEACHERS AS LEARNERS** BY YEHUDA KURTZER  
FILLING THE CISTERNS, FEEDING THE WELLSPRINGS

## THE FAMILY AT SCHOOL

- PAGE 16&17 **SOPHISTICATED PARENTS AND THE RIPPLE EFFECT** BY NAOMI PFEFFER  
WORKING IN SCHOOL ADMISSIONS REVEALS THE NEXT GENERATION
- PAGE 18&19 **MY SONS GO TO SCHOOL & I LEARN** BY LISA RICHLER
- PAGE 20 **WE LOOK OUTWARD & WE LOOK INWARD** BY RABBI Yael SPLANSKY & ADAM SOL  
WHY OUR REFORM FAMILY CHOOSES THE TORONTO HESCHEL SCHOOL
- PAGE 21 **PROUD OF WHERE WE CAME FROM & PROUD OF WHERE WE'RE GOING:** BY ASHIRA AND OHAN GOBIRIN  
WHY OUR ORTHODOX FAMILY CHOOSES THE TORONTO HESCHEL SCHOOL
- PAGE 22&23 **MARCHING TO THE BEAT OF YOUR OWN DRUM** BY SUZY ROSENSTEIN  
A BAR MITZVAH WITH MEANING

**The Lola Stein Institute** offers workshops and training to teachers and customized programs for schools.

OUR WORKSHOPS INCLUDE: INTEGRATED COURSES IN MATHEMATICS, GEOMETRY AND NUMERACY, SOCIAL SCIENCES, HISTORY, LANGUAGE ARTS, CIVICS, JEWISH TEXT AND THOUGHT & ENVIRONMENTAL LITERACY

### THE LOLA STEIN INSTITUTE

Chair  
Pam Medjuck Stein

Director  
Gail Baker

Dir. Curriculum  
& Training  
Greg Beiles

Vice Chair  
Michelle Shulman

Steering Committee  
Elizabeth Wolfe  
Ricki Wortzman

Operations  
Soheila Sabeti

### think THE LOLA STEIN JOURNAL

Editor  
Pam Medjuck Stein

Journal Team  
Bryan Borzykowski  
Shawna Cohen  
Lisa Richler  
Michelle Shulman  
Ricki Wortzman

Graphic Design  
Karen Patel

Photography  
Judith Leitner  
Suzy Rosenstein  
Karen Patel

## THE LOLA STEIN INSTITUTE

### JOURNAL CONTRIBUTORS

#### Contributors:

Gail Baker is Co-Founder and Director of the Lola Stein Institute, and Co-Founder and Head of The Toronto Heschel School. Gail nurtures a career long passion for reaching and teaching to the essential individuality in each child. Her parallel commitment is to encourage and refine the unique talents of each teacher on her team and beyond.

Greg Beiles is the Director of Curriculum and Training at The Lola Stein Institute and Vice Principal, Curriculum at The Toronto Heschel School. Greg believes children are active builders of knowledge and empathy, and that a child's perspective is shaped more by how learning is structured than by the specific content at hand.

Pam Medjuck Stein is Co-Founder and Chair of The Lola Stein Institute and a founding board member of The Toronto Heschel School. Her eldest three children are alumni, the fourth is now in grade seven. She has collaborated with The Toronto Heschel team since 1996.

#### Guest Contributors in this issue:

Lainie Filkow is Early Years Division Head at The Toronto Heschel School where she has taught Senior Kindergarten since 2002. She has studied at the University of Winnipeg, Harvard University and in Israel.

Ashira Gobrin is SVP Global Operations at Vision Critical / Angus Reid Strategies and Past Board Chair of The Toronto Heschel School.

Ohran Gobrin is a mechanical engineer, chartered accountant and business valuator.

Dr. Yehuda Kurtzer is the President of the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America. He has taught at Harvard University, Hebrew College, the Brandeis Initiative on Bridging Scholarship and Pedagogy, NYU's Center for Online Judaic Studies, and the AJ Commission on Contemporary Jewish Life.

Naomi Pfeffer attended York University's Jewish Teacher Education Programme and taught day school in Calgary and Toronto. She now co-ordinates Admissions and Communications at The Toronto Heschel School.

Lisa Richler, writer, fundraiser and teacher, now focuses on her three young kids, and volunteers at The Toronto Heschel School and the Lola Stein Institute.

Suzy Rosenstein develops resources and children's books at the CAMH in Toronto and plays sax in the Thornhill Community Band. She has been an active parent at The Toronto Heschel School for ten years.

Eli Savage teaches grade seven and eight at The Toronto Heschel School and develops workshops for the Lola Stein Institute. He worked at UCLA (Berkeley) and at Hillel of Greater Toronto as Director of Education.

Elana Segal, is a social worker specializing in counseling children and families. She co-chairs the Environment Committee at The Toronto Heschel School.

Rabbi Yael Splansky is a fourth-generation Reform rabbi, and currently serves as the Associate Rabbi at Holy Blossom Temple in Toronto. She is the editor of the forthcoming Siddur Pirchei Kodesh.

Dr. Adam Sol is a poet and professor of English literature at Laurentian University. He is the author of three books of poetry, including Crowd of Sounds, which won Ontario's Trillium Award for Poetry, as well as numerous essays and reviews.

Children must learn to quiet their minds, calm their physical selves and skillfully manage their emotions and impulses. Such self-awareness leads in two important inter-related directions. It fosters positive social interactions (alleviating problems with bullying). It also helps children sense their personal intuition and understand their own responsibility for their thoughts and actions.

The boy and the electronic toy exemplify learning in a reactive mode. The activity feels stressful. The game makes the child feel pressured and impairs his overall decision-making capacity. The win-lose framework keeps the child self-critical and negative. If a classroom fosters this mood, the student loses perspective and takes things personally. This is not our goal.

Children today spend hours in front of a screen. They get together to huddle over handheld devices and focus on winning at someone else's idea of fun. A responsive classroom breaks this pattern.

The preferred mode for classroom learning implies a relaxed state of mind, where students keep their bearings, see the bigger picture and take things less personally. To be at their best, we want our students feeling flexible and calm, open and receptive. Emotional and social learning is critical in our fast-paced and alienating society.

Once aware of these two drastically different modes of being - responsive and reactive - we can distinguish between schools in a new way. We can notice the predictable behaviors and feelings that come with each mode. We can see children feeling irrational and negative in the reactive mode, and calm and wise in the responsive state of mind. At our school we consciously and deliberately set up classrooms dedicated to social and emotional learning goals. We plan the learning so that our children can thoughtfully respond to whatever happens around them, to develop real insight and formulate opinions based on study and inquiry.

Social and emotional learning programs were initially developed to help young people face the crises of drugs, violence and family disintegration. Interestingly, another benefit emerged. The techniques were found to support academic learning.

Research in neuroscience shows that academic achievement correlates significantly to one's emotions or

social environment. The emotional centres of the brain interconnect with the neurocortical areas for cognitive learning. When a child is distressed, the brain's learning functions are temporarily stymied. The child's attention is preoccupied with her troubles and she can neither hear, understand nor remember what is being taught. Emotions link directly to learning.

## Children who learn reflectively learn better and meet life's challenges more constructively.

Educators must keep learning responsive and not reactive, reflective and not rote. Their strategies have to ground each student's learning in personal experience and understanding, so that each child absorbs the material covered in his or her own unique way.

In the hands of a wise teacher, computer activities can indeed foster authentic and responsive learning. They are wonderful engaging tools, especially if used to construct meaning and assess ideas. Students might construct their ideal school, researching options and ideas over the web and then building the school using a simulation program. Through online communities, across grades or globally, students can share ideas with peers and feel more responsibility for their own learning. Students might join a global effort to develop wells

in African villages, while studying water levels jointly with Israeli students and sharing their unique perspectives on relevant information. The problem is not the appliance but its application.

Similarly, all schools and classrooms exist to provide education. The differentiation lies in how they are used and to what end. Bells and whistles may give the appearance that learning is going on, but the important messages do not get through if the student is not emotionally and socially at ease. The enormity of this crucial contextual challenge makes it difficult for many schools and parents to absorb.

Thanks to neuroscience we now know that children who learn reflectively learn better and they meet life's challenges more constructively. Our way is to start by helping very young children disregard distraction, and move them through social challenges as they grow. We educate young thinkers who can rely on their values, their strengths and themselves.





# THINKING THINGS THROUGH

We read how Chana prays for children at *Rosh Hashanah*. She throws her soul into her prayers so deeply that she appears drunk and disorderly. Her efforts surprise and we met this again as the new school year got underway. On *Simchat Torah* we celebrate the cycle and rejoice as we set about to do the whole thing again. Such is the life of the parent. Go the distance for the kids and then do it all again.

When we throw ourselves into hope for our children's future, can we do it one hundred percent? Can we be sufficiently self-directed to do what is the very best for them? Social pressures and habits are very strong these days. Countercurrents are hard to deflect. Thinking things through is a challenge schools face, especially today when it is popular to deal in sound bite-sized answers.

This issue of our journal collects thoughts on thinking clearly and thinking deeply. Our writers address educational distinctions between the superficial and the profound, between automatic and reflective processes, between responsive and reactive learning.

**Such is the life of the parent: go the distance for the kids and then do it all again and again.**

Gail Baker reveals how, despite marketing hoopla, a child's experience with computerized learning tools can sometimes work against his best interests and complicate his natural affinity for his own ideas and imagination. She highlights how schools can proclaim the bells and whistles of the latest trends in education, yet miss the boat in delivering meaningful education. In Part Three of his series on Jewish thinking, Greg Beiles discusses mindfulness in Judaism, and relates *Mussar* traditions to contemporary educational theory for a particularly Jewish and time-tested orientation to education. Our Spotlight is on Judith Leitner, whose work integrating the arts into Jewish education, has deepened the learning experience for 16 years worth of students. Her leadership is now internationally respected.



Our focus on thoughtfulness at school continues. A Teaching Garden at school can underpin reflective learning in many ways and Elana Segal explains how an integrated environmental curriculum centres both the learning and the community. Lainie Filkow describes very young children as ready and able to learn how to learn. She shares her joy in their successes, as she teaches them to recognize conceptual connections and interdisciplinary correlations in all they learn. Eli Savage presents Junior High Civics as a vehicle to train students to formulate and express authentic yet respectful points of view, an urgent need in our times. Looking at the master teacher in Jewish tradition, Yehuda Kurtzer explains how, in their quest for excellence, the best of teachers embrace the tension between educational process and content.

We also share the personal thinking behind individual families' educational decisions. Two sets of parents, each strongly committed to different Jewish traditions, Rabbi Yael Splansky and Adam Sol, and Ashira and Ohran Gobrin, share why they choose The Toronto Heschel School. Lisa Richler describes her evolved appreciation of the whole Toronto Heschel School experience and what it means to her. Suzy Rosenstein tells how she tracked the school's method and emotionally connected her son to his *Bar Mitzvah*.

As always, we hope you find there's lots to think about as you read our journal. The deeper we go, the more we find.

# MEET JUDITH LEITNER

**Judith** is a co-founder of The Toronto Heschel School where, she has been the Director of Integrated Arts since 1996. Fluent in English, Hebrew and French, Judith studied Biblical Archaeology, Literature, and Art History at the University of Toronto and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and Photography at Hadassah Community College.

## *What does "arts-based" mean?*

Our school is neither an art school, nor a performing arts school. "Arts-based" puts focus on educational process not product. We teach through the arts, using music, dance, drama, visual arts, and storytelling as tools to develop a student's understanding of the curriculum.

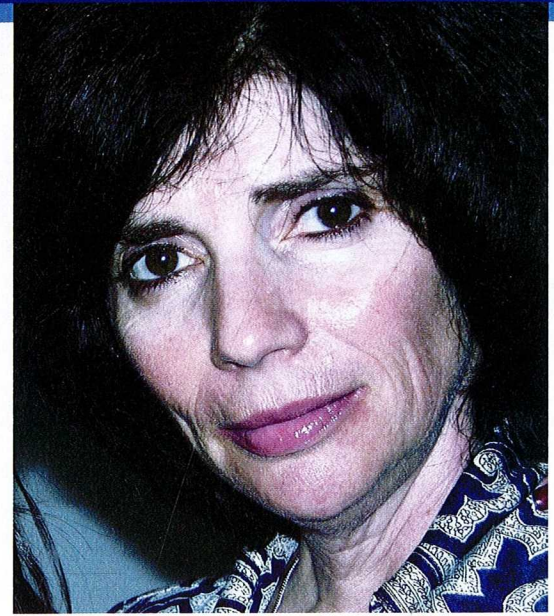
The arts underpin the learning in all subjects. For example, the Grade 6 "Eco-Seder" mines the Passover Haggadah for environmental themes. Beyond celebration of the Exodus, Pesach is also a festival of spring, renewal, memory and hope. A package of texts relates to each section of the Haggadah with thematic introduction, a scientific article with questions, and a math activity in data management. Students prepare the "Eco-Seder" in Language Arts, Science, Mathematics and Visual Arts classes, and ultimately present the relationship between Pesach and the environment through an installation that includes a sculpture, a three dimensional math graph, and their "Artist Statement." They set up a sculpture gallery of their installations in the order of the Hagaddah, standing by their work to explain their Eco-Seder to their peers and parents.

## *How does learning through the arts enrich education?*

When the learning is experiential and challenging, the learning process is etched in one's memory. Learning through the arts enables children to bridge knowledge and transfer thinking skills between disciplines, nurturing what Professor Howard Gardner calls "the integrative mind." Learners have enriched opportunities to self-express, pose questions and build self-confidence. (See H. Gardner, *Five Minds for the Future*, 2006).

## *Why are aesthetics important to your teaching?*

An appreciation for, and understanding of, creating one's personal sense of beauty are fundamental to us as human beings. Aesthetics offers an excellent forum for self-expression and self-understanding. But, we are not discussing 'beauty'



as an ideal, nor constructing it as an objective. (i.e. Is this beautiful?)

Point of view and tolerance for others' ways of seeing are paramount to our educational philosophy, just as experiential learning is core to the structure of our curriculum. When children engage in art-making of all kinds, they experience limitless opportunities to express their point of view and tolerate others' ways.

## *What does arts-based learning look like?*

It is a perpetual and evolving display. Artworks are always on view; as work-in-progress and complete. Display advocates for ongoing progress, effort and achievement, children teaching children. Signage accompanies the displays, so that as students walk the corridors they see titles, interdisciplinary integration, learning goals, descriptions of artful thinking and listed resources such as Chumash or Talmudic texts, math formulae, authors and artist statements.

## *What impact does arts-integration have on your students?*

Self-esteem comes with excelling. When children believe in the possibility that they can excel, they sense the opportunity they each hold for personal statement and creative power. Excelling means understanding one's own process as positive, even while work is incomplete or an idea not fully developed. Excelling means finding new perspectives, seeing 'mistakes' as superb windows of opportunity for learning and for reflection, which is part of the natural process for all creative thinkers. I see excellence when I see effort that goes beyond self-perception, with a willingness for creative risk. Self-esteem comes with a sense of accomplishment, both personal and as part of a community of learners.



# Middot, Mussar & MINDFULNESS

## JEWISH THINKING PART THREE

GREG BEILES DISCUSSES JEWISH PRACTICES THAT LEAD STUDENTS TO REFLECT ON THEIR OWN ACTIONS AND BECOME MORE MINDFUL.

Amid the hubbub of daily activity, with its manifold distractions and multi-tasking, we need to remember mindfulness. To be mindful is to pay careful attention to our inner experiences, our relationships, and the world around us. Mindfulness is popularly associated with meditation, relaxed contemplation, and quiet reflection, often through Buddhist-inspired teachings. It refers to a calm awareness of one's own body, emotions, impulses and thoughts.

Judaism has its own long tradition of mindfulness. Jewish thinking emphasizes a mindfulness that is a conscious coordination of one's physical actions with one's spiritual values and ethics. In Judaism, mindfulness is not a blissful state of "at-one-ness" with the universe, but an active stance of heightened awareness that derives from and leads to ethical action.

### Judaism has its own long tradition of mindfulness.

The 13th century Jewish philosopher Maimonides considers mindfulness essential for spiritual evolution. He urges us not to pray while our minds are on our business; nor to "perform the commandments only with our limbs... like those who are engaged in digging in the ground, or hewing wood in the forest, without reflecting on the nature of those acts." (Guide for the Perplexed, III:51). For Maimonides, mindfulness is not a matter of simply "being aware" or letting go of all worries. Mindfulness involves using our mind actively, with focus, to integrate thoughts and actions.

Like many religious practices in Judaism, mindfulness deeply integrates into ethics and *mitzvot*. The Jewish practice known as *mussar* exemplifies this.

*Mussar* refers to a Jewish spiritual-ethical movement, inspired by Rabbi Israel Salanter in 19th century Lithuania, which links the performance of ethical *mitzvot* to spiritual self-discipline. For example, the most important *mitzvah* for Rabbi Salanter, was the injunction against *lashon hara* - gossip and slander. Avoiding gossip and slander requires a disciplined mind, and heightened self-awareness.

Today, *mussar* is practiced in different forms, in diverse streams of Judaism, and focuses on developing character through an attention to traits and values, called *middot*, which include humility, gratitude, patience, tranquility, enthusiasm, and kindness. Literally, *middah* (the singular of *middot*) means "measure," in so far as mastery of each trait is the measure of one's character. Contemporary *mussar* teachers cultivate these positive traits and values using techniques such as guided meditation, text study, and writing activities. But, ultimately, the *middot* develop best through daily interactions between people and the practice of ethical *mitzvot*.

The Toronto Heschel School programme incorporates a number of *mussar*-inspired practices that lead students and teachers to become more self-reflective and mindful of their personal actions and perspectives. This results in greater personal self-discipline and improved interpersonal relationships.

### Middot HASHAVUA

Our *Middah* of the Week is inspired by the weekly Torah portion. For example, our *middah* "Be Welcoming" is based on the *mitzvah* of *hakhnasat 'orhim* which Avraham and Sarah observed when they welcomed weary visitors into their tent (Genesis 18). Our *middah* "Do your work with

care" draws inspiration from the craftsmanship of Betzalel and Oholiav who oversaw construction of the *mishkan* – the tabernacle (Exodus 35).

Each week, a different class is responsible for introducing the weekly Torah portion and its *middah* through a dramatized *devar Torah* at Monday morning prayer services. Each classroom teacher posts the weekly *middah* along with a Hebrew phrase from the Torah portion that best evokes this *middah*. Students are encouraged to memorize the Hebrew phrase and suggest ways to practice the *middah*. Throughout the week, teachers refer to the *middah* as teachable moments arise: students are reminded to "Be Welcoming" when a guest or substitute teacher arrives, or when a child wishes to join a game at recess. "Do your work with care" applies virtually all day. At the end of each week classes discuss their experiences of the *middah* that week.

### Middah JOURNALS

As students mature we approach character development more intensively. *Middah* journals are featured in the Grade 6 *tikkun olam* curriculum. Each student chooses a trait to practice conscientiously for two weeks, enters the selected *middah* in her journal, and imagines ways to practice it. She enters her reflections on obstacles and successes as her practice evolves. Some students share their thoughts with their teacher or peers.

### HABITS OF MIND / ETHICAL Middot

The use of *middot* to nurture positive character traits dovetails with contemporary pedagogical research. Educational theorists Costa and Kallick encourage teachers to help students develop learning dispositions that they call "Habits

of Mind." These habits include persistence, impulsivity management, and flexible thinking.

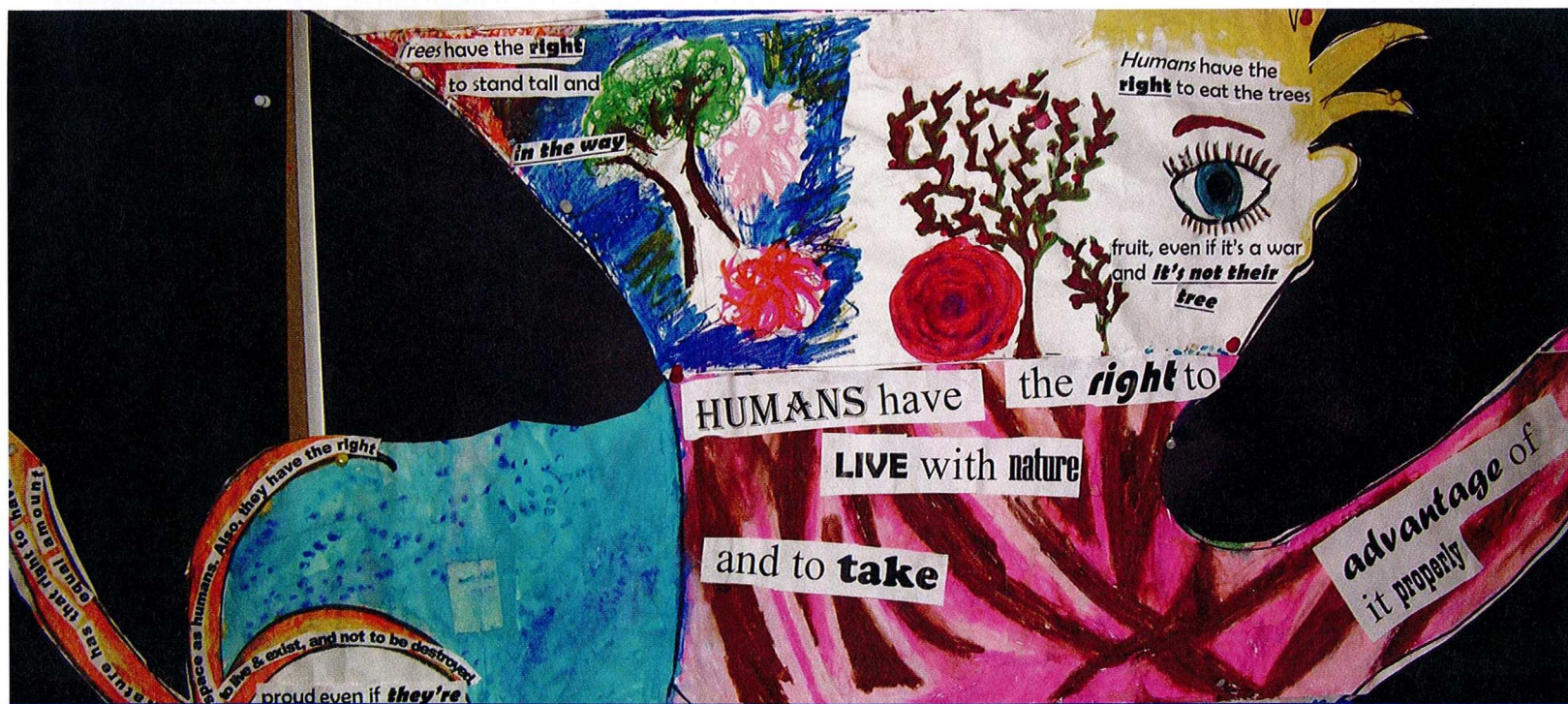
To manage impulsivity, student practice the *middah* "Think Before You Act," learned from the consequences of Esav's rash actions (Genesis 25). They consider the value of persistence through the *middah* "Persist with difficult tasks," inspired by Ya'akov, who worked 14 years to marry Rachel (Genesis 29).

Importantly, the ethical dimension in *middot* differentiates them from most "Habits of Mind." Habits of Mind" focus primarily on personal development, *middot* almost always have an interpersonal, social dimension. At school our in *middot* include: "To do something kind, don't wait to be asked," "Admit when you have hurt someone" and "Encourage others to be confident."

The result of mindfulness is greater personal self-discipline and improved interpersonal relationships.

The proactive focus on *middot* orients students and staff to adopt conscious behaviours that generate respectful relationships. Ethical behaviour becomes corridor and classroom norms. The practice of *middot* creates a positive school culture.

The genius of *mussar* and *middot* is how this form of Jewish mindfulness renders ethical action the primary path for spiritual development. As Rabbi Salanter said, "The material needs of the other are my spiritual needs." We become who we are through how we treat others.





# CULTIVATING LEARNING IN THE TEACHING GARDEN

BY ELANA SEGAL

Excellent schools cultivate learning in as many ways as possible; some even cultivate a garden. The Toronto Heschel School has its own Teaching Garden, which yields an abundance of educational benefits. Students plant, grow and harvest fresh fruits and vegetables for their school community and neighbours, and reap valuable competency in ecological literacy, a new 21st century proficiency standard that relates to understanding living systems and their environment. The school is honored to be the only Toronto Jewish day school offering this enriched learning facility.

Studies into education, the environment, and health deliver fascinating evidence of the advantages of a teaching garden. In her summary of literature on the impact of school gardens, E.J. Ozer found that school gardens "promoted students' achievement, psychosocial development, motivation to learn, behavioural engagement and their cooperation with peers." (Ozer, Health Education and Behaviour, 2006, The Effects of School Gardens on Students and Schools: Conceptualization and Considerations for Maximizing Healthy Development.)

A Toronto District School Board study found that students involved in a school garden showed more enthusiasm and engagement for learning, better retention of knowledge and increased ability to think more creatively. (Dyment, J.E., Evergreen, 2005, Gaining Ground: The Power and Potential of School Ground Greening in the Toronto District School Board.) Learning in the garden develops students' sense of responsibility, cooperation and teamwork, increases student time outdoors and motivates students to pay closer attention to foods. Environmental awareness and eating fresh produce become normative, and the benefits of a school garden continue further.

The Toronto Heschel School's Teaching Garden and environmental programme underpins the school's sense of success. Ozer (2006) found that schools with gardens report more school community pride and the feeling that theirs is a 'good' school. This enthusiasm is visible at the many Toronto Heschel events that centre around the garden throughout the year. The "feel good" spirit bolsters success overall.

Even before school begins Garden Guardians (23 families this year!) are out weeding and watering, harvesting and caring for the

garden. Peas, strawberries, mint and enormous sunflowers greet all who visit. In the fall, as families celebrate Sukkot, the holiday of harvest, students gather squash, beets, tomatoes, onions, potatoes and other vegetables for the annual "Sukkot Soup," cooked to delicious perfection by parent volunteers.

## A TDSB study found students involved in a school garden show more enthusiasm and engagement for learning.

We serve latkas made from our garden's potatoes on Chanukka and in spring many hours are spent moving earth, planting, mulching, cleaning and doing what it takes it to ready the garden for the new season. In June, the whole school enjoys the organic salad that was planted, cultivated, harvested and prepared by Grade 3 students. The list of activities goes on and on.

The Teaching Garden rivets student focus on the questions: "Where does our food come from? How does it grow? Who will take the care to grow it?" The questions lead our children to consider their relationship to nature and their role in caring for it.

This is reflective learning at its essence. By engaging students to participate in the cycle of planting and growing, the garden welcomes students to experience and therefore understand where their own nourishment originates. A pea is not simply a pea. It is a seed a child has personally nurtured, while considering its needs to survive and become a tall, flourishing pea plant.

Without a doubt the children appreciate the fruits of their labour. One supply teacher at Toronto Heschel once commented that he had "never seen kids get so excited about vegetables and salad. They just kept lining up for more!"

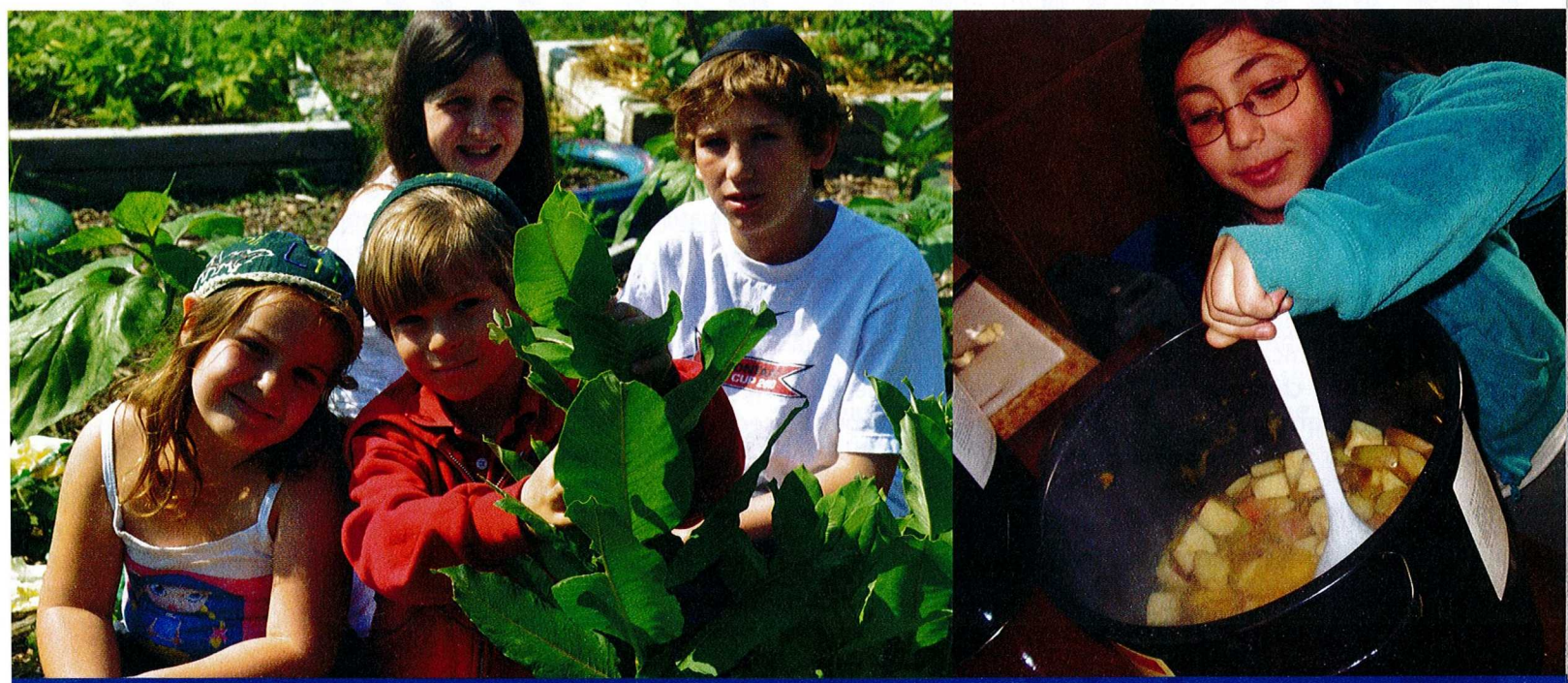
Their parents mirror their conviction and excitement. Parents plant their own seeds by sending their children to a school that values ecological literacy. They then bolster this decision through participation in the school's garden activities, and annually, they reap a harvest of excited and committed environmental enthusiasts, who have mastered a myriad of cross curricular skills while gardening their hearts out.

In this season of the Jewish new year, we remember that the essence of *Torah* is to choose life (Deuteronomy 13:19). Ecological literacy provides children with competency towards understanding living systems and the lives of people who live within them. Through their environmental studies, children can become better centred on that core Jewish value. And it can all begin in a garden.

Planning for education, David Orr, a board member with the Centre for Ecoliteracy, advises that, "This tug toward life is strongest at an early age when we are most alert and impressionable. Before their minds have been marinated in the culture of television, consumerism, shopping malls, computers, and freeways, children can find the magic in trees, water, animals, landscapes, and their own places. Properly cultivated and validated by caring and knowledgeable adults, fascination with nature can mature into ecological literacy and eventually into more purposeful lives." ([www.ecoliteracy.org](http://www.ecoliteracy.org))

In the Teaching Garden, children, teachers and parents collaborate as students, professionals, and volunteers. They live the values that serve a flourishing garden, a successful community and a better world.

(With thanks to Talia Benoliel Singer for providing documentation.)





talking FACE to FACE:

# JUNIOR HIGH CIVICS PURSUE DEMOCRACY

BY ELI SAVAGE

Recently at a restaurant, I watched a family of four look at each other only once while dining together. Their eyes met briefly as they ordered their food. For the rest of the meal, the two parents and two pre-teenagers gazed into their BlackBerrys.

Our electronics-enthralled culture markets gadgets as boosts to human communication. We reach one another wherever and whenever we choose. Sadly, in fact, these conveniences often reduce the quality of our dialogue and the exchange of our ideas.

Kids watch adults and their role models display diminished concern for face-to-face interaction. Our market driven society flourishes oblivious to children's very human need for personal communication skills, which come uniquely through the

increasingly anachronistic practice of talking eye to eye. The times are shortsightedly insensitive to the social and political implications of poor communication skills.

Good dialogue entails listening well, and expressing authentic ideas respectfully and strategically. The philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, expounds on the Jewish notion of holiness in listening. He says, "the uniqueness of each act of listening carries the secret of the text; the voice of revelation, in precisely the inflection lent by each person's ear, is necessary for the truth of the whole." (Levinas, *Revelation in the Jewish Tradition*, p. 195).

I teach good dialogue in my Junior High Civics course at The Toronto Heschel School. We call the course "Democratic Classroom Communities."

Democracy requires true communication. Students and teachers collaborate weekly on decisions for school-wide projects. The course goal is not to deliver a majority vote for a well-planned social action project but for each student to personally experience democracy in action.

Experiential learning delivers the most profound education. Students absorb concepts at a deeper, more lasting level than simple intellectual engagement. In our democratic classroom meetings we do not learn about democracy through descriptions in a book. We practice the principles of social equality from inside a democratic decision-making process. We experience dialogue and participation.

The class features leadership roles and participation protocols, through which students listen and debate in the midst of partisan exchange. A "Chairperson" manages the discussion, a "Recorder of the Speaker's List" identifies speakers, a "Scribe" clarifies and records and an "Observer" takes notes and reports on the group's performance. Participants must be prompt and prepared, express their own opinions and neither speak for, nor judge others.

## In our classroom, we practice the principles of social equality from inside a democratic decision-making process.

Junior High Civics correlates contemporary academic research with insight from ancient Judaic sources. It is The Toronto Heschel School way to use Jewish text to gather meaning when students are introduced to complex ideas, such as the meaning of dialogue and the clarification of values.

Students begin exploring democracy with a Judaic text of intense rabbinic debate. They study the text "It's not in Heaven" (Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia 59b), which suggests that the outcome of democratic debate may not be as important as the process. If done correctly, the process of rabbinic debate exceeds a rich learning experience to become transformative and holy.

The study of moral development measures the way we "do good," with others. Democratic dialogue hones students' moral development, i.e., their ability to think abstractly and move beyond themselves in outlook and practice.

One of the foremost thinkers on education and moral development was Lawrence Kohlberg. His "view of moral education involved transforming schools into just communities where students actively participated in the social and moral functioning of the school and where teachers and students were viewed as equal participants in a democracy". (Handbook of Moral and Character Education, Larry P. Nucci, Darcia Narvaez (2008) p. 270). This is the orientation of our Junior High Civics class.

Kohlberg outlines six stages of moral development: Obedience and Punishment Orientation, Individualism and Exchange, Good interpersonal relationships, Maintaining the social order, Social contract and individual rights, and Universal principles. W.C. Crain notes that motivation to act for "good" derives solely from personal benefit to the individual, in the first four stages (Crain, Theories of Development, 1985). The desire to benefit society appears in Kohlberg's higher stages five and six and is a major departure.

Motivation to act for the common good shifts from a uniquely personal impetus to encompass a desire to understand third party perspectives. And to understand another person's point of view, and value it as equal to one's own, necessitates excellent listening skills. In my view, this ultimate stage in moral development requires democratic dialogue.

So, what is it about this class that makes the learning so unique? Through authentic dialogue students receive an antidote to the powerful persuasions of society as effected by peer pressure and mass culture. Students see firsthand that their individuality is best served through honest and respectful interactions. They experience questioning and responding to their peers and they learn to assess whether the opinions at hand reflect values they personally choose or not. The role of education is to assist students to mediate for themselves and to make their own choices.

I noticed one Chairperson struggling. She had to introduce the meeting, maintain order, stay on task respectfully but firmly. At one point, the student Chair was confronted and responded, "I see your point, but isn't this the focus of the project?"

Tension filled the room and then subsided, as the corrected classmate absorbed the respectful non-judgmental rebuff. This simple straightforward act, executed by a tentative chairperson, was a profound hands-on experience in leadership and communication. The moment passed and all students learned a lot that day.

## The role of education is to assist students to mediate for themselves and to make their own choices.

In our "democratic classroom community" teachers help students find their balance as they develop the habits of mind essential to self-expression, respectful participation, and mutually beneficial decision making. Our Civics course fuses democratic dialogue for the purpose of students' moral development with the Jewish notion of the holiness inherent in listening and respectful debate.

Communication skills can never be undervalued as schools prepare their students for the road ahead. Let's empower our learners to become strong communicators and mindful collaborators in an increasingly complex impersonal world. We can start with conversation at dinner.

# THINKING AND THOUGHTFUL AT FIVE: TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING IN SENIOR KINDERGARTEN

BY LAINIE FILKOW

Even though I have been teaching The Toronto Heschel School's integrated curriculum for many years, I am still amazed when I see how the lessons transform my students. Yearly, as the children conclude Senior Kindergarten, I see the astounding increase in their abilities to make connections and formulate analogies. The programme affects them deeply.

One year I had 12 children in my class. After studying the 12 Israelite tribes that descended from Ya'akov's sons, my youngest student raised his hand and said, "I'm like Binyamin," — Ya'akov's last born son — "because that's my Hebrew name, and I'm the youngest of the 12 kids in this class!"

The other teachers and I chuckled at the cute comment, but the moment is not memorable because it was funny. It stands out because it shows how this young student had connected and applied what he was learning to his own life. Listening to the story of the 12 tribes, he connected *Torah*, math and his own personal experience. He noticed equivalences and made analogies: there were 12 tribes and 12 children in our class; he was our youngest and his name matched Ya'akov and Rachel's youngest. He was our own Binyamin.

**We train our students to consider the deeper implications of what they encounter everyday.**

All children make analogies. They notice similarities. Indeed, analogizing may be the central component of the way humans think. Yet, not all educational approaches respect this. Our curriculum and classroom practices are designed to encourage, enhance, and tap into the innate human inclination to make connections, in both the cognitive and affective domains.

While our curriculum encourages connective thinking in every subject, I find math an especially exciting class to teach. Children naturally think about numbers. They count their cookies and calculate the blocks they need for their tower. But most children do not realize initially that numbers transfer across a wide range of objects, an abstraction that relates to many concrete situations. We help students recognize this by applying numbers in class to diverse experiences and areas of life.

One of the first narratives in *Torah* is the story of Creation. When our SK students learn this story we take time to highlight the number seven as the number of "days" of creation. It may be the first time students understand there is more to the number seven than its placement after six and before eight. Their eyes light up with recognition when they realize Shabbat is on the seventh day and that seven days make a week. Soon enough they figure out when the weekend is coming.

Children are natural makers of meaning, and the way in which they are taught significantly influences the kind of meaning that they make of the world. For example, children are fascinated by rainbows. There is something awe-inspiring about that colourful band stretching across the sky. What meaning are they to make of it?

Our *Torah* teaches that the rainbow is not a magical pretty sight, but rather a reminder that God wants us to live by fair laws and to treat each other well. At age five, SK students are making cognitive connections in the physical realm at the same time they are making affective connections in the social domain. We connect "rainbows" to both science and ethics and train our students to consider the deeper implications and meaning of the amazing creations they encounter every day.

## SKETCHING THE TALL TREES

Our discussion about rainbows begins with the story of Noah's Ark when a rainbow appears across the sky. As the class experiments in the science of rainbows, our young students realize that rainbows are physical not "magical." We create our own rainbows with prisms and flashlights and see how light bends to create different colours. We then apply this knowledge to the interaction of sun with rain.

**A child's natural desire to make cognitive and social connections flourishes when teachers inter-relate ideas mindfully.**

Once all the animals had left the ark after the flood subsided, the rainbow appeared to remind people to make the right choices (Genesis 9:12-17). We analogize the rainbow's seven colours to the seven basic laws that God handed down and these "Noahide Laws" become the "Seven Helpful Habits" we use to get along with others in class. Rainbows provide a vehicle to teach young children to be moral and socially sensitive human beings.

The Jewish-Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky finds that early social connections, such as between parent and child, are the primary connections affecting a child's language and thinking. In Senior Kindergarten children enter a more complex social environment. They are learning to socialize and need our help. Our curriculum of connections and our Jewish traditions serve this objective.

Using scenarios from *Torah*, we encourage children to "role-play" characters that model *Derech Eretz* – positive social relations. For example, we learn that Avraham and Sarah welcome guests - three angels disguised as



men – into their tent (Genesis 18). We then ask the children to pretend to be hosting a friend at home when it's their turn to make a guest feel welcome. They act it out and experience the role.

The children are again connecting *Torah* to their own lives, while exercising their analogy making muscles. They absorb the similarities in structure and in purpose deeply in parallels to characters from *Torah*. They learn that an important part of being Jewish is to make creative correspondences with the wisdom of our ancestors and our tradition. The children connect as Jews.

A child's natural desire to make cognitive and social connections flourishes when teachers inter-relate ideas mindfully, and daily implement a curriculum such as ours. Linking more and more things together, the child's correlations become more and more sophisticated. The student becomes accustomed to seeking information from one area that can enlighten a totally different direction, to finding all kinds of lessons everywhere, even in rainbows high in the sky.



# TEACHERS AS LEARNERS: FILLING THE CISTERNS, FEEDING THE WELLSPRINGS

BY YEHUDA KURTZER

Although Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai is better known for his political leadership in founding the circle of rabbis at Yavneh in the wake of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, he is also remembered in Jewish literature for his exceptional status as a master teacher. Needless to say, this is not a trait shared universally by all great scholars and sages.

Jewish tradition places value on a variety of intellectuals and thought leaders: scholastic thinkers, meticulous collectors of knowledge, chroniclers of the past. Though many of these scholars also had disciples, not all would merit the title of "great teacher." Yohanan ben Zakkai is one of the few who stands out. A case in point: in the second chapter of Mishnah Avot, when describing the chain of transmission from the revelation at Sinai down to the writers of the Mishnah, the rabbis paint Yohanan ben Zakkai as an anomaly. Unlike his colleagues who produced a single star disciple, or perhaps a matched pair of learners (like Hillel & Shammai), Yohanan had five master students. This alone hints that we are dealing with an unusual commitment to pedagogy. The text itself is remarkable:

"Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai had five disciples: Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, Rabbi Joshua ben Hanania, Rabbi Yose the Kohen, Rabbi Shimon ben Netanel, and Rabbi Elazar ben Arach. He would recount their praises: Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus is

a cemented cistern that loses not a drop; Rabbi Joshua ben Hanania, fortunate is she who gave birth to him; Rabbi Yose the Kohen is a hasid (pious); Rabbi Shimon ben Netanel fears sin; Rabbi Elazar ben Arach is as an ever-increasing wellspring."

Two characteristics distinguish Yohanan ben Zakkai here. First, the text tells us that Yohanan is aware of the nuanced differences in how his students learn, that he recognizes their unique skill sets and the character traits each brings to the learning process. The second characteristic is his ability to value each student as an individual learner in the teaching process.

Not every student has the retentive memory of an Eliezer ben Hyrcanus. All do not merit the piety of Rabbi Yose, a generous spirit eager to learn and put his learning into action. We see Yohanan ben Zakkai as the master teacher who identifies different learning styles and appreciates the distinct strengths of his students.

As teachers, we also seek ways to be learners. Rabban Yohanan models that for us here, suggesting that as we become more astute observers and interpreters of our students, so more skillfully can we adapt our knowledge and resources to suit the personal approach each student brings. The best professional

resources for teachers seek to reinforce this important pedagogical learning process. Master teachers meet their craft, not only as storehouses of knowledge, but as gatekeepers to those storehouses, even as creative and adaptive delivery systems.

Yet while adapting and creating, we cannot let go of the 'teacher as storehouse' metaphor. Indeed, in the texts that follow this excerpt, the rabbis seem almost beguiled by Rabbis Eliezer and Elazar as the most credible inheritors of Rabban Yohanan's legacy. These two sages represent the retention of knowledge and the ongoing creative process that retention enables.

In the five character traits of Rabban Yohanan's five disciples, we see independent qualities that together comprise a holistic learner. Nonetheless, in the rabbis' partiality towards Eliezer and Elazar, we still sense that we had best not lose track of content when we diversify styles of learning. The art of teaching may lie in this synergy.

The challenge for educators is how to grow continually in ways that replicate this diversity of pedagogical approach with its unyielding commitment to wisdom. How do we acclimate ourselves to the spectrum of students in our classrooms? How do we train our senses to refine communication for the best delivery of education to our students; and at the same time, how do we refill our own cisterns with an ever-burgeoning, and creatively generative knowledge base?

Very fortunately, we find ourselves living in a heyday of *Torah* study. More and more opportunities for serious Jewish learning are emerging and available to the change-agents in our communities: to rabbis, community leaders, and Jewish educators. (One example is the advanced learning seminar the Shalom Hartman Institute is offering educators in Toronto this year.)

A variety of historical and cultural reasons underly this renaissance and the valuing of *Torah* applied to leadership. In essence, we are witnessing a reawakened awareness of how ideas, texts, and the process of learning have always been central to the strength of our identity as a people. The less we learn, the less we even know who we are.

Would that we too leave a legacy like that of Yohanan ben Zakkai, five pillars to strengthen the Jewish people during times of turbulence and crisis! Perhaps our best bet is to follow Yohanan's example, and combine inspired leadership, a life of learning and a commitment to the practice of teaching. The legacy cannot flow through independent characteristics or solitary commitments, but all of a piece in aspiring to greatness in our work.

## FEATURE **TEACHER**

# **KOL HAKAVOD**



**Zippi Zisu**

For 15 years, Zippi Zisu has kindled a sense of Jewish identity in her students, who range in age from four to seven years. Zippi fully immerses her students in a foreign language, Hebrew, and uses song, drama, body language and expressive gestures to help the children gain fluency. Without using a word of English (even in the hallways or on the playground), Zippi empowers her young students to read, write, speak and understand this new language, making it their very own. At the same time, Zippi explores Chumash stories and ethical themes, entirely in Hebrew, further igniting in her students a feeling of what it is to be Jewish. Zippi's hard work and commitment are evident in her students even after they have moved on to higher grades, as they continue to thrive.



**Tova Sabeti**

Tova Sabeti has launched her career with passionate commitment to her Junior High students. Tova's students discover themselves as young adults, responsible for their own voice and for contributing to their community. Tova focuses on writing skills to enable students to meaningfully express their personal perspectives. Her creative energy expands beyond her teaching duties and sees her managing the Junior High student council, teaching dance, and developing an enhanced Grade 6 curriculum called "Learning Tefillah (Prayer)." Tova is a team player par excellence, whose commitment to teaching is felt by her colleagues and students alike.

# SOPHISTICATED PARENTS AND THE RIPPLE EFFECT:

## WORKING IN SCHOOL ADMISSIONS REVEALS THE NEXT GENERATION

BY NAOMI PFEFFER



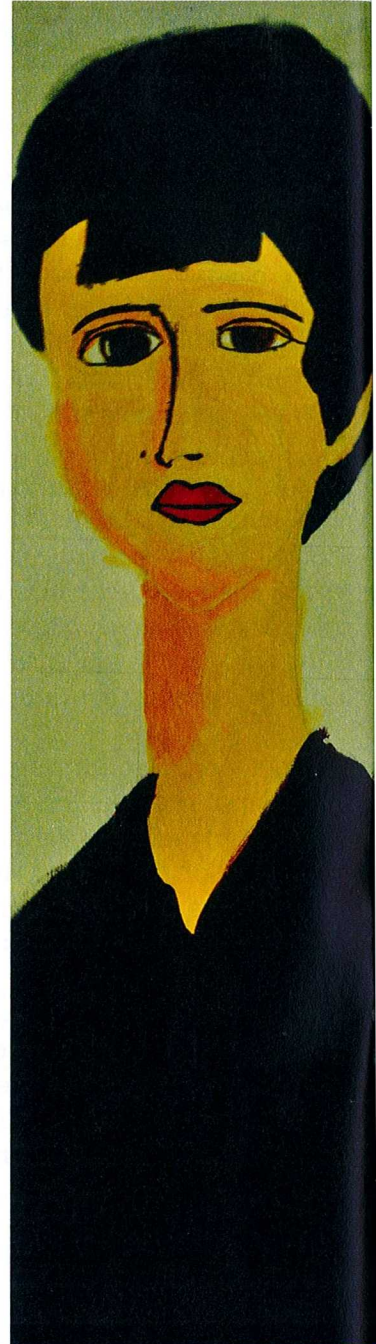
The profile of the parent seeking education is in transformation. Recently, to complete my Master of Education degree, I chose to research women who enter into the study of Jewish text. I gathered quantitative and qualitative data on their backgrounds to understand their motivations for initiating study.

Personally, I have always been involved in Jewish education as an enthusiastic participant and a dedicated practitioner. I attended Jewish day schools, Jewish summer camp, participated in community programming and my home has always been infused with Judaism. I was wondering what leads others to study.

As I learned the individual stories of the participants in my study, I found that these women decided to explore Judaism because of their children's interest in Jewish life. One of my participants explained, "When a Jewish child brings home a challah and shares the lessons learned in the week's parsha (*Torah* portion), it is astounding how intrigued and involved the parents become."

The average age of my participants was 50 years old and many had not had a positive experience with Jewish education, if any at all. As I delved further, I began to see that my participants' children, many now adult, did have sound connections to Jewish learning. These older mothers and grandmothers were catching up.

Indeed many Jewish parents today are more equipped for Jewish life than were their parents. Young parents are more mindfully selecting Jewish schooling for their children. As coordinator of admissions at The Toronto Heschel School, I notice that prospective parents, aged 25 to 40 years, ask impressively inquiring questions about the school's atmosphere, pedagogy and philosophy, demonstrating their background Jewish knowledge and a familiarity with current educational options. The past twenty years have seen a flowering of Jewish education, with ever more camps, schools and Israel programmes, so much so that parents, with positive Jewish experiences behind them, now pursue their children's education with more sophistication than in years past.



I meet parents who want their child's Jewish identity to be a natural and all-encompassing awareness, free of the personality split suggested by the old world model, which segment the day between Jewish and so-called secular studies. The parents I meet understand the symbiotic nature of Jewish and universal studies and the integrated Jewish education offered at our school answers this concern for the whole child, as do the most progressive Jewish day schools outside Canada.

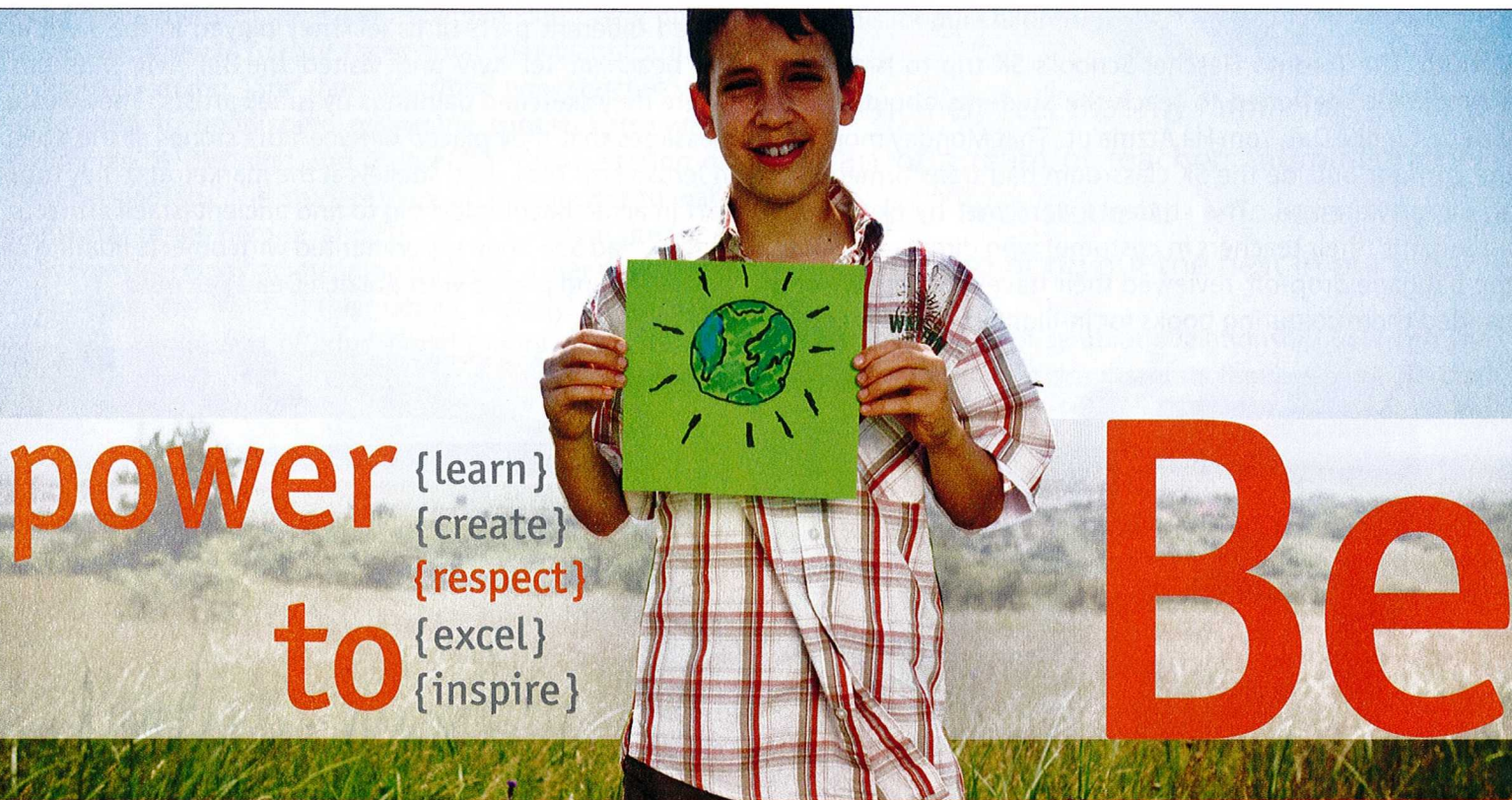
Parents are no longer willing to accept that Jewish day schools are an alternative to the "best" education possible. They require a school to be as advanced educationally as any other private school and they want proof that the motivational component of the overall program is dynamic and successful. As I meet these parents I am fascinated to see how proactive they are in ensuring their children are really getting the best in every dimension.

Parents are keen and savvy. They ask what exactly we mean when we say our academic standards are high, our curriculum is enriched and our teachers are continually advanced as professionals. They want to know why and how an integrated approach fosters academic excellence, how we teach important cognitive skills that exceed critical

thinking, and how we manage to instill strong Jewish ethics and values in our students. They want to know how we can confidently assert that the development of self-esteem runs through our entire program.

I take parents around and explain how the school's guiding principles are evident throughout the building, from the art we hang on our walls, to the language we use in the classrooms, to the discovery-based science experiments underway and the social action projects our families undertake. In my discussions I have to be explicit. My pedagogical knowledge and my Judaic studies background are in demand at all times. Parents today require the full megillah.

Another truth, now visible in 2010, is that a child's Jewish education has a 'ripple effect' on his or her parents. My thesis research proved this point. A child's solid Jewish experience at school flows home, strengthening the family's identity and connection to Judaism, and this ripples out to grandparents and friends building more involved and committed Jewish communities. The ethos of The Toronto Heschel School is deeply rooted in the wisdom of Jewish thought, tradition and interpretation. The delivery of our education is rooted in the art and science of pedagogy. Parents today seek it all.



The Toronto Heschel School  
בית הספר על שם השל

Academic Excellence in Jewish Education

**What could this mean for your child?**

Learn more about The Toronto Heschel School experience.  
Phone 416-635-1876 ext. 334 or email  
[admissions@torontoheschel.org](mailto:admissions@torontoheschel.org).

# MY SONS GO TO SCHOOL & I LEARN

BY LISA RICHLER

One Monday morning a few months ago, I gave my son a hug and a kiss, handed him a suitcase, his passport and boarding pass, and bid him a safe journey. He was leaving that morning on a week-long class trip unlike any other he or I had ever experienced. He was going to Israel.

Did I mention that my son was five years old? In Senior Kindergarten?

In truth, The Toronto Heschel School's SK trip to Israel was a simulation, designed to teach the students about Israel's Independence Day, Yom Ha Atzma'ut. That Monday morning, the corridor outside the SK classroom had transformed into an airport terminal. The students were met by El Al flight attendants (their teachers in costume) who directed them to the baggage drop-off, reviewed their travel documents, and handed them colouring books for in-flight entertainment. A

cleverly-designed mural of an airplane hung on the wall. To make it look like the SK students were actually seated on a plane, photos had been taken of them in rows of three, which were cut into the shape of windows.

My son and his classmates were literally bounding with excitement, and I could not wait to hear about all of their adventures. Over the course of the week, the SK students visited different parts of Israel. They played in the sand at the beach in Tel Aviv and visited the Tel Aviv Museum, where they sketched paintings by Israeli artists. They wrote messages that they placed between the stones at the Kotel in Jerusalem. They used Shekels at the market, and they took part in an archaeological dig to find ancient Israeli artifacts. At the Dead Sea, they experimented with objects floating in salt water, and played with the rich Dead Sea mud.



My son and his friends were so immersed in the fun of these activities that they didn't even realize they were learning! Math, science, history, art, language arts, Hebrew – it was all covered. But the kids were learning these subjects in an exciting context that made sense to them.

One of my favourite parts about parenthood is being able to see the world through my children's eyes. When my kids learn something new, I feel like I'm learning it all over again. Watching my son get on board the flight to Israel that day, I could sense his curiosity igniting, I could see connections being made in his mind, and I could feel his happiness. It was one of many times that I stood in the hallway at school with tears in my eyes.

### **I did not anticipate the impact that The Toronto Heschel School would have on me personally.**

When people ask me and my husband why we choose to send our kids to the Toronto Heschel School, I tell them about the SK trip to Israel, and about the countless other ways in which the school brings learning to life. A few years ago, before we knew where we wanted to send our oldest son for JK, I met with Heschel's principal, Gail Baker. Gail explained how important it was for students to care about what they were learning and to learn by doing. She then described how Heschel students are taught to understand geometric concepts like area and perimeter by planning and then cultivating a section of the Heschel garden. The students would actually get to walk the perimeter of the garden, and fill the area, so that the formulae they were learning had meaning for them. Later they would get to enjoy the fruits of their labour, literally! I was struck by Gail's knowledge of educational theory and research, and even more so by the creative ways in which the school put these theories into practice.

But while I knew coming into the school about its cutting-edge teaching methods, I did not anticipate the impact that The Toronto Heschel School would have on me personally. Two years after my oldest son entered the school (my second son began JK in the fall), I am amazed by how connected I feel to it. I genuinely feel that my family has become part of a team of teachers, administrators, parents and students who are working together to bring out the best in our kids.

Being connected to Heschel means that many of the extraordinary things that go on at school continue at home. Right from the beginning of JK, the Heschel teachers explore different ethical

themes with the children in meaningful and age-appropriate ways. Before Yom Kippur, for instance, the children are asked to think of behaviours they can improve upon in the New Year. They draw a picture of a resolution (e.g. I will try to share with my brother; I will not hit), which is posted on display in the hallway. They also travel by bus to the Don River (this time it's for real!) and symbolically throw their sins into the running water, carrying out the ancient Jewish practice of Tashlich. Exercises like these spill into discussions at our dinner table or at bedtime. Many times last year, if my two boys were having a hard time getting along, the older one would remember that he "threw fighting into the river", and he would try (with adult help) to find alternative ways to deal with the situation.

In two short years, many Heschel families have become our close friends. The school has physically brought us together - at drop off and pick up, at concerts and curriculum nights, and at dozens of other school-related events throughout the year. But on a deeper level, we are drawn together by our similar interests and values, by our common belief in the school's mission, by our goals for our children.

### **I genuinely feel that my family has become part of a team of teachers, administrators, parents and students who are working together to bring out the best in our kids.**

There is a kind of symbiotic relationship between The Toronto Heschel School and its families. The Heschel parents I know are deeply committed to strengthening the school. They all volunteer their time and energy in some capacity: they participate in *Mitzvah* Day, they help sow the Heschel garden, they orchestrate the lunch program, they fundraise, they organize book clubs and lectures, and so on. These efforts undoubtedly make the school stronger and help it deliver the kind of education that we seek for our children. And as we continue to see our kids thrive, we feel increasingly committed to the school, and work to make it even stronger.

The Toronto Heschel School is so much more than a place where my kids will learn various subjects and master various skills. It has become the centre of a community of people who are working together to mold our kids into thoughtful, responsible, well-rounded people. This is a whole dimension of schooling that I never anticipated, but for which I am extremely grateful.



# WE LOOK OUTWARD & WE LOOK INWARD:

## WHY OUR REFORM FAMILY CHOOSES THE TORONTO HESCHEL SCHOOL

BY RABBI Yael SPLANSKY AND ADAM SOL

We feel that our strong Reform Jewish family identity and The Toronto Heschel School's strong pluralistic Jewish education complement one another perfectly.

We are the products of three generations of Reform rabbis and *rebbitzins*, Reform synagogue presidents and religious school teachers, Reform summer camp leaders, and youth group advisors. But we are also the products of a pluralistic Jewish Day School (Yael's Yavneh Day School in Cincinnati, Ohio) and a pluralistic synagogue (Adam's "only show in town" *shul* in Danbury, Connecticut required its students to pray with the organ and choir on Fridays nights and *daven* with the old men and their schnapps on Saturday mornings.)

It's been said there are really only two kinds of Jews in the world – serious Jews and not-so-serious Jews. Serious Jews do not compartmentalize their Judaism, do not limit it to certain times and occasions. Rather they make Judaism a way of life, a way of thinking, a way of engaging with the world. We are serious Jews, now doing our best to raise our children with the best of Reform Jewish values and practices. We find The Toronto Heschel School to be a great partner in this great task. Here are some of the reasons why.

For some two hundred years Reform Jews have aspired to meet modernity head-on, to engage with the world beyond the Jewish community, while maintaining their particularistic allegiances to the Jewish people. Yael's grandfather, Rabbi

Ernst Lorge (z"l) was a student and friend of Rabbi Heschel. Both were rescued from Nazi Germany by Hebrew Union College, the Reform Rabbinical School. Later they marched together in Selma and made social justice a pillar of their rabbinates. The Toronto Heschel School does right by its namesake, modeling a living Judaism that faces outward to the wide world beyond the Jewish community, as well as inward to *Klal Yisrael*.

Reform Judaism has always put a high premium on inclusivity. Girls and women were among the first to benefit, but the openness, which is one of the hallmarks of the Reform movement, is a far-reaching attitude, by which every individual and every idea is deserving of respectful consideration. The Toronto Heschel School aspires to such openness.

As a rabbi (Yael) and a poet/professor of literature (Adam), we are students and teachers of text and the interpretation of text. For better and worse, the Reform Jewish tradition allows for greater latitude than others when interpreting our sacred texts. It is more willing to take some risks, to challenge and to be challenged by the texts. We continue to be amazed at how the Toronto Heschel curriculum invites even the youngest students to engage with sacred texts in creative, disciplined, and sometimes playful ways.

The Splansky-Sol family is firmly planted within the Reform Jewish world – we're at Holy Blossom Temple every Shabbat and Yom Tov, we're at Camp George every summer. We hope our boys will grow to be leaders within the NFTY youth movement as we were, and maybe even meet their besherts there as we did. But beyond our appreciation for Reform Judaism's principles is our love of *Klal Yisrael*.

We want our sons to befriend children with differing Jewish outlooks and expressions. We want our children to feel confident in any *minyan*. We want our children to be at home in Israel. We want our children to lay claim to the range and richness of Jewish life, which is their inheritance.



# PROUD OF WHERE WE CAME FROM & PROUD OF WHERE WE'RE GOING:

## WHY OUR ORTHODOX FAMILY CHOOSES THE TORONTO HESCHEL SCHOOL

BY ASHIRA AND OHRAN GOBRIN

When we think back on our own upbringings, it is clear that the greatest gift that our parents bestowed on us was the strength to be confident in our Judaism, to lead by example and to use all we have to contribute to the world around us. We want most to give our children the very same gift that our parents gave to us - but that is easier said than done.

Our parents and grandparents devoted many years of their lives to learning and teaching *Torah*. They helped build strong Jewish communities in places where there was no Jewish infrastructure, ensuring that the next generation of Jewish children had something to be proud of and something to strive towards. One of our children's great grandfathers was senior rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregation of Johannesburg and chief rabbi of the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation.

Educating our children is one of the hardest jobs that God gives us as parents. Partnering with a school that will share in realizing the goals and aspirations we set for our children is a vitally important decision, and not always a simple one to make. There are many considerations.

So when asked why an Orthodox family like us chose The Toronto Heschel School for our children's education, we can say that we looked long and hard to find a school to match our ideal educational vision. At the end of the day, we chose something that stretches and expands a child's perspectives, that creates some discomfort and challenge to religious and ideological complacency, and still allows our family the space to be authentic to our own messorah (traditions).

The Toronto Heschel School maintains high standards of Jewish academic excellence, delivered by its highly trained

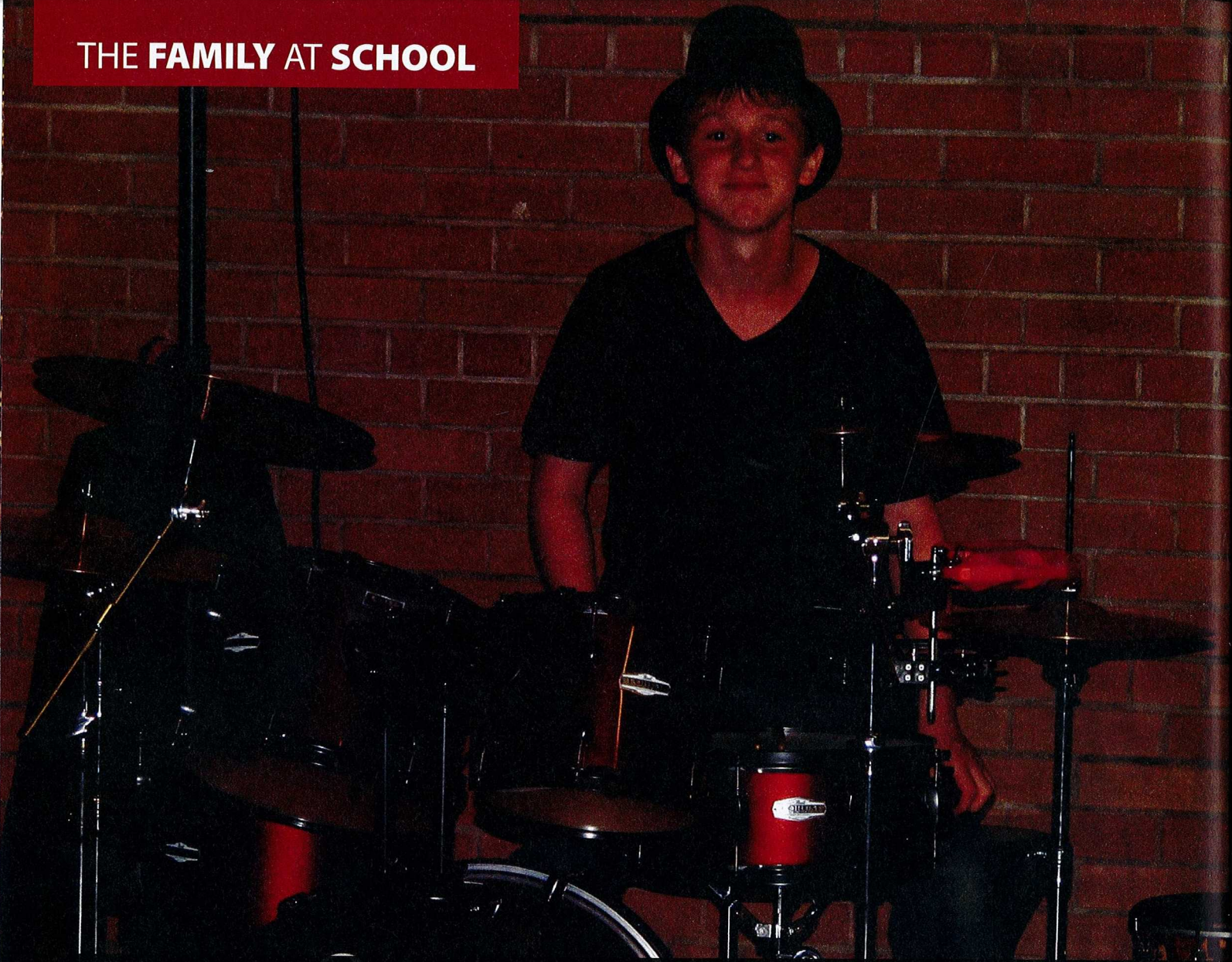
and very devoted teaching staff. The resulting impact is an environment where students learn that their secular lives and Jewish lives are one and the same.

The students excel with the bar set high. They achieve goals and push themselves further so that they continually grow. They learn respect for Jewish values, for themselves, for each other, for the world around them and then they inspire others to do the same. They create with the arts, with language, with thoughts and with Judaism.

Not everyone at our school keeps kosher and Shabbat the same way we do. It is not the same *Torah* environment that we were raised in nor the same educational system that we went through as children. Nonetheless, the important point is that our three children, with the support of their teachers and friends, are proud to celebrate and invest in their Judaism and live according to *Halachah* the way our family has for many generations. They are able to learn from being in a diverse Jewish environment that encourages them to be the best people they possibly can. They are very happy to be who they are.

We see our children being true to who they are, even in an environment where everyone is not the same. Our children are learning to lead by example, and not by criticism of those who choose to do something differently. They learn from everyone around them with integrity and respect, from friends and teachers across a very broad religious spectrum.

We are extremely grateful to partner with The Toronto Heschel School in the education of our three children. They are proud of where they came from and just as proud of where they are going.



# MARCHING TO THE BEAT OF YOUR OWN DRUM

## A Bar Mitzvah with Meaning

BY SUZY ROSENSTEIN

Kids don't always sail into their *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah* year with a huge smile on their face. Praying, reading *Torah*, participating at (and even going to) synagogue isn't what all 13-year-old boys and girls want to do. For my son, Alex, the prospect of a suit and tie just made matters worse. It's a rebellious age and these are just the types of requirements to put a rebellious kid over the Jewish edge.

My husband and I faced the daunting dilemma of how to make the *Bar Mitzvah* experience as meaningful and as memorable as

possible. It was a critical moment in raising my lovable grouchy Jewish boy. The risk of turning our son off and burning him out was huge. The pressure was on.

I thought about how we had seen Alex thrive at school and wondered how we could be as effective as his teachers at The Toronto Heschel School. One of the first things I noticed was how the teachers use personal relevance to motivate their students. To give their students important learning experiences, the teachers leverage their pre-teen students'

emerging reach for power and the gratification it brings. Alex is motivated by social justice and empowerment.

Following the school's *modus operandi* I asked myself how I could link Alex's personal interests to something that would make a difference in his life and provide him with a sense of meaningful achievement. I wondered how I could now connect my son personally and powerfully to becoming a *Bar Mitzvah*, a son of the laws.

Alex, a passionate drummer, was complaining regularly about the less than perfect state of the school's drum kit. Then the idea hit me — instead of giving money to a charity unconnected to my son, as is the norm with *Bar Mitzvah* *tzedakah* projects, maybe he could raise enough money to buy the school new drums. Relevant, rewarding and valuable to his community — the idea had the all elements I sought.

I asked Alex if he would like to donate a new set of drums to the school in honour of his *Bar Mitzvah*. He looked at me with wide eyes and a hint of excitement in his face.

"But I'm graduating in a year, I really won't get to use it," he said.

I explained that he would be leaving his mark, a musical legacy to the school, and that students would play drums at Toronto Heschel on a fantastic new instrument for years to come, all because of him. Alex loved the idea and I knew I was on to something.

Next came the hard part, where my loving but grouchy son had to figure out how to earn and deliver the donation. To buy drums, hardware, cymbals and a seat, he needed \$1300. We decided to hold a garage sale.

Alex understood that if he didn't earn the \$1300, he would be adding his own money. We asked other Grade 7 families, relatives and friends for garage sale items. Our youngest son would sell lemonade and cookies during the sale.

On the big day the weather was perfect. At 11:00 am we had only \$900 and feared we'd never reach our goal, but suddenly, by 1:00 pm, we were \$100 over! Alex purchased the most beautiful red drum kit the very next day, adding a cool Latin block and tambourine, thanks to his extra earnings.

As he set up the drum kit in The Toronto Heschel School music room, the look of satisfaction on Alex's face was priceless. He carefully adjusted each drum and cymbal with immense pride. It was three weeks before his *Bar Mitzvah*.

In his *d'var Torah*, Alex described his drum donation and quoted the man for whom his school is named, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who said, "The opposite of good is not evil; the opposite of good is indifference."

Had Alex been indifferent, he would have continued to

complain about poor drums, and taken no action. But his conviction was to improve drumming at school and he took action. He calculated that after 1584 days, or 12,000 hours, or 760,320 minutes or an astounding 45,619,200 seconds at The Toronto Heschel School, he felt motivated to make the school a better place.

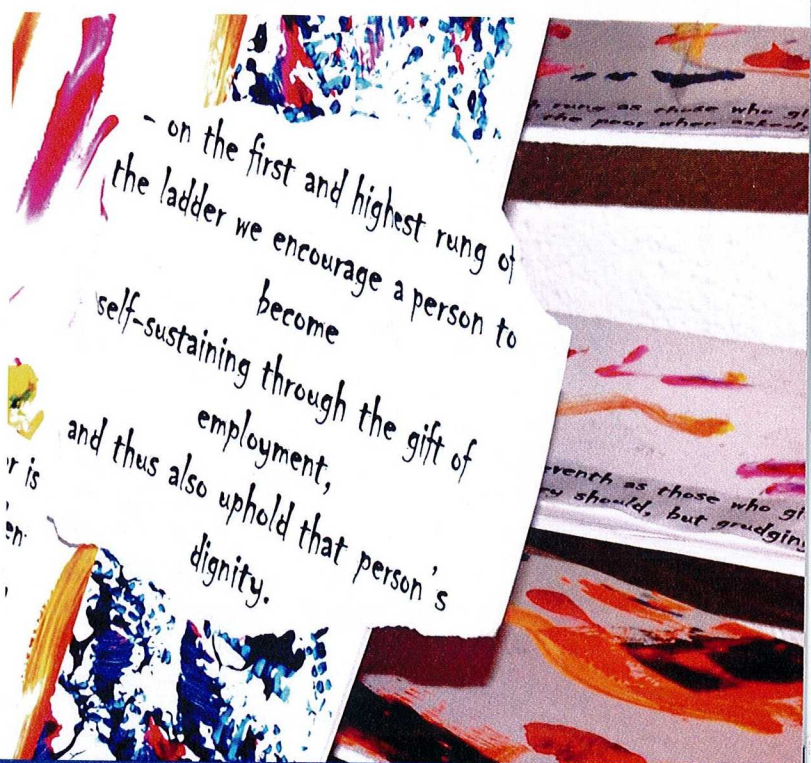
Of course, my lovable but grouchy son read *Torah* beautifully on his big day and the party was a blast, especially when he played drums with the professional band. Nonetheless, his drum kit donation to Toronto Heschel was key to making the *Bar Mitzvah* experience meaningful. And, of course, it wasn't really about the musical instrument. The trick was to connect Alex's identity to his passion.

Rabbi Heschel also said, "God is hiding in the world. Our task is to let the divine emerge from our deeds."

I feel so lucky that I thought to take what Alex learned at The Toronto Heschel School and let him run with it. He grasped the chance to take a stand and experienced himself as a young man of focus, contribution and legacy.

How much clearer can a *Bar Mitzvah* message be? How grateful are we that The Toronto Heschel School trained him in this direction. Know your convictions. Take a stand. Feel the power and get a result!

Our son saw his efforts make a difference before his very eyes. The school has improved percussion and Alex has the satisfaction of achievement. Social activism and a caring community are a big part of The Toronto Heschel School. It's good grounding for his life ahead. I saw it all reflecting back, as Alex's *Bar Mitzvah* became meaningful to him, at last.



# **\$2 MILLION FOR TEACHING EXCELLENCE THE LOLA STEIN INSTITUTE CONGRATULATES THE TORONTO HESCHEL SCHOOL ON THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE TEACHING EXCELLENCE FUND**

**The Teaching Excellence Fund at  
The Toronto Heschel School has a mandate to:**

- attract, retain and empower talented, motivated teachers
- support the highest calibre of professional development
- award teachers' extra special effort and achievement
- foster all that is required for teaching excellence.

With an initial \$2 million target now achieved, the School is positioned to support the very best team of educators. In this core capacity The Toronto Heschel School joins ranks with the most successful independent schools worldwide.



**The Lola Stein Institute**  
LEADERSHIP  
IN EDUCATION

The Lola Stein Institute advocates that inspired and motivated teachers are key to the best education. Only with committed, energized teachers, can schools deliver the learning our children deserve and we envision. We congratulate The Toronto Heschel School and welcome this new point of departure for Jewish day school education in Toronto.