



think

THE LOLA STEIN INSTITUTE JOURNAL

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inside this issue:

**GAIL BAKER
ON
TEACHERS
AS ROLE MODELS**
PAGE 6

**THINK LIKE A
SCIENTIST
AT
THE MCEWEN CENTRE
FOR REGENERATIVE
MEDICINE**
PAGE 8

**CLASSROOM
COMMUNITIES
THAT
ENHANCE STUDENT
POTENTIAL**
PAGE 10

**WHO KNEW
CHOOSING A SCHOOL
WAS SO PERSONAL?**
PAGE 18

AWE & WONDER

IN THE PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE: JEWISH DAY SCHOOL IS THE ANSWER

By Greg Beiles

For some parents, enrolling their children in Jewish Day School education is a clear choice. Family tradition, strong adherence to Judaism as a religion, attachment to the land of Israel or the Hebrew language are all reasons that some families would only choose a Jewish Day School education for their children. However, for an increasing number of families, these reasons are not compelling enough.

Some parents believe that their children can maintain a healthy Jewish connection through synagogue affiliation or summer camp alone. There are those who think Jewish education is only about religion. Some wonder whether a Jewish education provides students with a perspective broad enough to succeed in Canadian society or the “globalized” world. Others consider Jewish Day School as just a way to get the advantages of private school education at a fraction of the cost.

The ability to anticipate and re-encounter ideas with fresh and maturing eyes is central to the Jewish method of learning.

These attitudes overlook the best that the Jewish experience has to offer. A well-executed Jewish Day School education integrates rigorous intellectual development, strong social conscience, emotional development, and critical thinking. The composite result is accomplished through drawing on both an ethos and a method based on thousands of years of experience.

continued on page 3

Gail Baker, M.Ed., co-founded The Toronto Heschel School in 1996 and has served as Head of the school since 2001. She is the Learning Community Director of The Lola Stein Institute, which she co-founded in 2003. Gail’s parallel commitment pursues the essential individuality in each child and the unique talent in each teacher. She presents lectures and seminars throughout North America and writes regularly for educational journals.

Greg Beiles, M.A., is Director of The Lola Stein Institute and Curriculum Consultant 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 content at hand. Greg is now completing his doctorate in the Philosophy of Religion.

Pam Medjuck Stein, LL.M., is the Editor of *think: The Lola Stein Institute Journal*. She co-founded The Lola Stein Institute in 2003 and serves as its Chair. A founding board member of The Toronto Heschel School, Pam has collaborated on Toronto Heschel’s team since 1996.

Lisa Richler earned a Master of Arts in English at the University of Chicago and worked as a writer and teacher before having kids. She now volunteers in various roles at The Toronto Heschel School and The Lola Stein Institute.

GUEST CONTRIBUTORS

Heidi Friedman, M.Sc.(Ed.), views education holistically, with goals to teach academic skills, foster critical thinking and inquiry, and help children navigate their social world. With expertise in leadership as well as teaching, Heidi believes in the infinite potential of children. She is a Literacy and Learning Specialist at The Toronto Heschel School.

Dan Goldberg holds a B.A. in Jewish History from Harvard University and a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from the California School of Professional Psychology. He has served as Director of Education and Youth at Beth Tzedec Congregation in Toronto and as Head of Judaics at Krieger Schechter Middle School in Baltimore. He is currently Tefilah Coordinator and a Grade 5 and Grade 7 teacher at The Toronto Heschel School.

Lainie Rapp graduated with a Master of Social Work from Wurzweiler University in New York City. She consults part-time on a palliative care team at Sunnybrook Hospital, teaches grief and bereavement counselling at George Brown College, and facilitates a bereavement support group at Wellspring. She and her husband have one son and are proud parents in the Toronto Heschel community.

Rabbi Howard Morrison attended the Jewish Theological Seminary. He has been the Rabbi at Beth Emeth Bais Yehuda Synagogue since 2000. During that time, he has been president of the Ontario Region of the Rabbinical Assembly, first VP for the Toronto Board of Rabbis, and an Executive Member of the Int’l Rabbinical Assembly. He has served as chaplain to Mazon Canada, the Jewish War Veterans, and the Toronto Jewish Free Loan Casa. His two sons are at Toronto Heschel.

Eli Savage, M.Ed., pursued advanced training at Columbia University Writer’s Workshop and at Facing History and Ourselves. He was Director of Education for Jewish Campus Life in Toronto and at U.C. Berkeley. Since 2005, Eli has taught Grade 8 at The Toronto Heschel School. He also coordinates the junior high student council, coaches the debating team, and develops curriculum and workshops for The Lola Stein Institute.

thinkTABLE OF CONTENTS

COLUMNS

P. 3 AWE & WONDER

IN THE PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE:

JEWISH DAY SCHOOL IS THE ANSWER

by Greg Beiles

P. 4 EDITOR’S DESK

P. 5 SPOTLIGHT

ELLEN KESSLER

VISIONARY, SCIENCE TEACHER, NATURALIST, AND JEWISH EDUCATOR

P. 6 TEACHING TEACHING

ROLE MODELS, PLEASE:

“IT IS THE PERSONALITY OF THE TEACHER WHICH IS THE TEXT THAT PUPILS READ,” A.J. HESCHEL

by Gail Baker

P. 8 NURTURING NATURE

DEVELOPING SCIENTIFIC THINKERS:

THE MCEWEN CENTRE FOR REGENERATIVE MEDICINE LAUNCHES EDUCATIONAL OUTREACH

by Lisa Richler

FEATURED ARTICLES

P. 10

CREATING A CLASSROOM COMMUNITY:

HOW TO CONSTRUCT A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT THAT ENHANCES STUDENT POTENTIAL

by Heidi Friedman

P. 13

DEBATING:

LEARNING TO ARGUE CAN MEAN THE WORLD TO YOUNG TEENS

by Eli Savage

P. 14

HARNESSING THE POWER OF PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS:

THE KEY TO EDUCATION AND JEWISH CONTINUITY

by Dan Goldberg, Ph.D.

P. 16

ACTIONS & ATTITUDES:

THE SECRET PERFORMANCE OF JEWISH VALUES BEGINS WITH GOOD EDUCATION

by Rabbi Howard Morrison

THE FAMILY AT SCHOOL

P. 18

WHO KNEW CHOOSING A SCHOOL COULD BE SO PERSONAL?

WE COULDN’T LET CONVENIENCE, GEOGRAPHY, AND NEIGHBOURHOOD DICTATE OUR SON’S ACADEMIC FUTURE

by Lainie Rapp

AWE & WONDER continued from cover...

To learn well, children need a sense of safety that comes with predictability and continuity. Jewish education is structured around the Jewish liturgical calendar, with its cycle of holidays and recurring narratives. The weekly Sabbath and the yearly cycle of holidays – Rosh Hashanah, Chanukah, Sukkot, Purim, Passover, Shavuot – provide a pattern that children can anticipate, and this predictability supports their understanding of these themes and narratives at ever-deepening levels.

The ability to anticipate and re-encounter ideas with fresh and maturing eyes is central to the Jewish method of learning. Years of learning this way, where understanding continually deepens, instils a multi-dimensional perspective. Children learn to look again and then again, and they notice how they can see more each time. For five year-olds, the Passover narrative may be a story of bull rushes, a burning bush, and matzah; but, year by year, they discover more and come to understand the Passover themes of freedom of choice and conscience. They witness how the more profound themes of this eternal story emerge and they remember how they first saw them.

Children learn to look beyond what is obvious, and know there is always more to discover.

This is a life skill, not just a Jewish skill. The children become accustomed to analyzing and understanding situations, problems, and people at more than one level. They learn to look beyond what is obvious, and know there is always more to discover.

Jewish education teaches how to bridge ethical ideals with practical life. Over the past 2,000 years, Judaism developed profound expertise in informing the needs of daily reality with the visionary ethics of biblical monotheism. According to the Talmud (Kiddushin 29a), a child must be taught both the moral teachings of Torah and a “craft” or a profession through which to earn an honest living. Even the practical teaching of a profession is understood by the Talmud to have an ethical component, as it prevents a child from growing up to be needy.

As this integration of ethics and practical life shows, Judaism and good Jewish education do not formulate utopian ethical ideals, but are oriented towards ethical deeds. Children, who are raised to view real life situations through an ethical lens, learn to make their way in the world with a strongly ingrained moral compass.

Students immersed in Jewish teachings learn this approach from an early age, and get used to relating ethical teachings to their own lives. In Grade 1, students may read how Abraham gave his nephew Lot first choice of the best land, and they learn that sometimes, for the sake of peace, we let others choose first. By Junior High School, students connect the Talmudic notion of safeguarding human dignity to the modern concept of human rights and to the current events they hear in the news.

Jewish education is an education in good citizenship. Judaism understands that the cherished Western values of human rights and individual freedom depend upon taking up communal and personal responsibilities. Learning civic responsibility within the context of Judaism prepares students to be active, responsible, and engaged citizens. The Ten Commandments is first and foremost a “Bill of Responsibilities.”

At one time Jewish Day Schools were called “parochial,” which is an unfortunate misnomer. In fact, students attending progressive Jewish Day Schools reap the advantage of true biculturalism. They become Jewish Canadians whose depth of Jewish knowledge only broadens their perspectives and enhances their contribution to Canadian society and world culture.

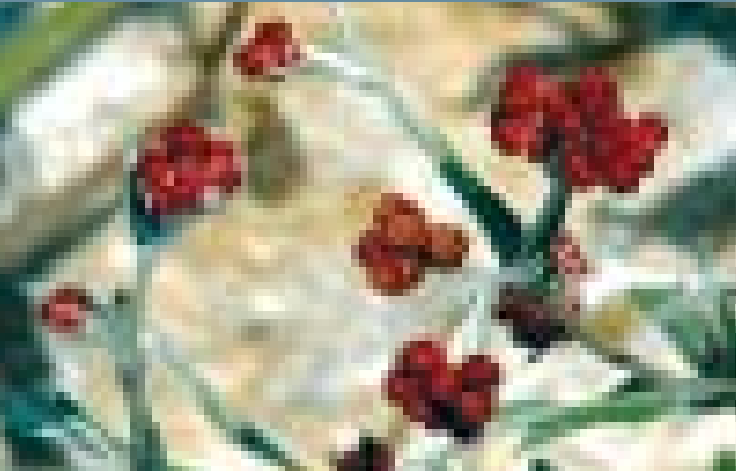
Judaism is “teaching” par excellence.

In the true spirit of Jewish learning, day school students are encouraged to ask questions, make creative conjectures, and seek deeper understanding. As students apply lessons of ancient texts to contemporary problems, they continuously make the kind of analogies and inferences which comprise the essential cognitive skills for higher level reasoning and critical thinking. As students analyze and study a history that encompasses 3,000 years of interaction with world history, they gain a historical perspective that is rare among their contemporaries. Through Jewish learning, students’ pursuit of knowledge and their wielding of critical thought – both of which are highly valorized in education today – are tempered by the humility that comes with ethical thinking and an ingrained sense of responsibility for themselves and others.

Some of the advantages of Jewish education may be garnered through a potpourri of other sources: camp may encourage identity; good secular schools may teach critical thinking; families may instruct civic responsibility. But Jewish Day School education integrates all of these elements, every day, all day long.

Torah means “teaching,” and Judaism is “teaching” par excellence: shaped, tested, and refined over thousands of years of experience. Jewish education integrates intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and social learning to enhance our children’s growth and development in profound ways.

ON CHANUKAH WE REMEMBER,
“To be is to stand for.” A.J. Heschel



Throughout the Judaeen Hills,
small red flowers blossom.

They are called דם מכבים

(Blood of the Macabees)

חג חנוכה שמח



think wonders about the Jewish educational experience: how process, people, and virtue combust to create excellence.

We are often asked about the relationship between The Lola Stein Institute and The Toronto Heschel School. This issue's articles display the relationship nicely: the why and the how of Jewish education.

Our writers contemplate the performance of excellence: what is it about Jewish thought and Jewish method that makes the pedagogy so distinctive? Their answers divide between the goals of mastery and the personalities of the players.

The Lola Stein Institute also divides its work. Attentive to high academic standards, the Institute develops curriculum, then polishes it at The Toronto Heschel School before moving to publication. Valuing the critical importance of motivated educators in the learning process, the Institute also stages professional development opportunities for Toronto area schools. We are about method and leaders.

Greg Beiles writes that the focus, self-discipline, and inspiration essential to academic excellence are inherent in Judaism itself and are therefore found in good Jewish education. Rabbi Howard Morrison advises that we can reach higher standards through mindful behaviour as prescribed by the performance of *middot*, Jewish virtues. Eli Savage also addresses intentionality by encouraging students to debate, a traditional Jewish skill with ongoing personal and interpersonal benefit.

All this is only as good as the people involved. Gail Baker, in her new column, "Teaching Teaching," places the individual teacher at the centre of the educational paradigm, just as each child is a core variable in his/her learning. Gail is a master of this conundrum and her opening piece offers a glimpse of more to come. Focus on the educator helps us understand what motivated Lainie Rapp in her

search for a school and why Dan Goldberg emphasizes the role of personal relationships in the best learning. Social connection helps children thrive and Heidi Friedman explains the interpersonal chemistry that creates productive classroom community.

The think Spotlight is on Ellen Kessler, a science teacher, whose vision has been to nurture students' bonds to nature by integrating Jewish learning with environmental studies. Our themes dovetail as Lisa Richler describes how learning science cultivates young inquiring minds towards making a difference in the world; she shares how exciting it is that Toronto's McEwen Centre for Regenerative Medicine is now reaching out to students even as it makes landmark discoveries one after the next. Role models abound.

It's like the Hasidic tale told once by Rabbi A.J. Heschel: A soul, transported to the afterlife, became emotional on finding heaven to be a chamber filled with sages of the Talmud studying at long tables. "He felt a keen disappointment: Is that all there is to heaven? Suddenly he heard a voice. "You are mistaken. The sages are not in heaven, heaven is in the sages."¹

¹ "Existence and Celebration," *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays by Abraham Joshua Heschel*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), p. 18.

Enjoy the tenth issue of **think**!



Lola Stein z"l was an early female pharmacist in South Africa, but her very special talent was in hospitality and friendship. She cared for family and friends, at home and abroad, individually, uniquely, and lovingly. One friend chooses to honour her memory in a way that also reaches out to many.

The Lola Stein Institute reaches teachers close to home and afar. The Institute began within The Toronto Heschel School in 2003 and has expanded its educational leadership more broadly, thanks to international recognition of its excellence in teacher training and curriculum development. It now offers workshops locally and internationally, customizing the delivery of its attention and expertise uniquely to each school.



Ellen Kessler is a co-founder of The Toronto Heschel School. Her vision as a science teacher and naturalist developed the school's unique profile in ecological education. Ellen combines her commitment to Judaism with her love for nature and for teaching children.

Under Ellen's leadership, Toronto Heschel's nature study and ecological literacy programs have won awards and honourable mentions from *Canadian Geographic*, the Jewish National Fund, the City of Toronto, and the Province of Ontario. Now semi-retired, Ellen works as the school's Environmental Education Consultant. Her programs continue to be central to Toronto Heschel's environmental studies direction.

think: Why do you think environmental education is key to learning?

Ellen: The purposefulness of life is discovered when we go outside. We learn about how we relate with our surroundings. There is so much that kids would miss if they didn't have the chance to get their hands dirty, to walk around with a shovel, to learn to grow food, or even to look into the face of a cricket! Environmental education teaches kids to be responsible, caring, and ethical. Children who respect nature will learn to protect nature.

Some kids are innately gifted with naturalist intelligence; other kids need some help in cultivating their inner naturalist. Like book literacy, ecological literacy is a skill that is fundamental to leading a meaningful life and in preserving the beauty and splendor of our world.

think: What are the benefits of a teaching garden?

Ellen: No school should be without a garden, or a space for outdoor exploration and learning. Outdoor learning makes education tangible. It gives students opportunities for tactile, real-life experiences that tie in with so many parts of the curriculum.

In Grade 3, for instance, our students complete an integrated project where they grow an organic salad large enough to feed the whole school. The year-long project allows students to learn botany, math, and environmentalism, as well as teamwork and ethics.

There are also so many community benefits to a teaching garden. Much of the work and effort that goes into the garden comes from parents and families. On our annual Mitzvah Day, parents donate supplies and help to raise beds, lay down seed, and haul dirt. In the summer, a different family volunteers every week to tend to the garden, weeding, watering, harvesting, and reseed. We call these volunteers our Garden Guardians.

The garden gives our students and their families a sense of place, and really engages them.

think: Describe the green space at The Toronto Heschel School.

We are so lucky to have six hectares of green space. Our garden is 25 by 25 metres. It has a section with food gardens and other raised beds, and a naturalized play space where students can run free that is left fallow (not mowed). The naturalized space includes newly planted fruit trees and a butterfly garden, where wildflowers and plants attract an array of pollinators and butterflies.

think: Why is environmental education key to Judaism?


Loving nature means loving God's Creation. Ecological literacy and the Jewish Spirit are inextricably connected. Remember that God placed Adam (and Eve) in the Garden to "guard it and protect it" (Genesis 2:15).

Now look at the environmental crisis in terms of Judaism. There's an active way for our children to address this. It is called *Tikkun Olam* (Hebrew for "repair of the world"). We take our students outside beyond the school walls to care for the earth, the soil, the insects and animals, humanity itself – all who depend on it. We grow food. We celebrate the Jewish calendar and holidays (mostly agrarian) in a garden, harvesting food for the needy during Sukkot,

celebrating pollinators for Rosh Hashanah, appreciating spring for Pesach. Our Grade 6 students study the connection of the environment to all social issues in an EcoSeder. Our Grade 7 students conduct an integrated math and Judaic unit on conserving the School's resources in an energy audit.

think: What does it mean to be a gold-certified EcoSchool?

We are very proud at Toronto Heschel to have led Jewish schools to become certified EcoSchools. We were the first of these to become gold-certified. This means that the students themselves have been empowered to take our school to a level that measures against all other EcoSchools in Ontario in the areas of our facility's use of energy and management of waste; our integration of sustainability throughout curriculum; and how we activate our environmentalism in the outside world.

THE LOLA STEIN INSTITUTE

The integrated Jewish education espoused by The Lola Stein Institute is delivered at The Toronto Heschel School, a pluralistic Jewish community day school in Toronto, Canada.

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ROLE MODELS, PLEASE

By Gail Baker

"It is the personality of the teacher which is the text that pupils read."

– A.J. Heschel

Headlines and pictures blaring from magazines these days are too terrible for my eyes, let alone for the eyes of young children. Popular culture sends the wrong messages to our children everywhere they turn. Magazine, television, and Internet headlines read "Teen Mom Pregnant Again" and "Young Star Back in Jail."

In a media-saturated world, children are receiving the message that the road to happiness lies in notoriety and acquiring trendy products. This contradicts what older folk know intuitively and what a multitude of research studies now confirm: that the road to happiness is, in fact, through learning to build healthy relationships and to make positive informed choices.¹

We must counteract the cultural icons that complicate our children's minds.

Somehow, to ensure our children thrive intellectually, socially, and emotionally, we must counteract the cultural icons that complicate our children's minds with models of violence, sex, and drugs. It's no longer a matter of "just turning the page." The modelling pervades our society. Parents have to take positive steps and push back.

Research also reveals the power that role models hold for children and teens.² They are diligent observers, always watching and listening to what the adults around them do and what the adults say. By definition, a role model is a person whose behaviour is observed and imitated by others. So who are our children's role models?

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel had this to say about the teacher:

Everything depends on the person who stands in front of the classroom. The teacher is not an automatic fountain from which intellectual beverages may be obtained. The teacher is either a witness or a stranger. To guide the pupil into the Promised Land, he or she must have been there... When asking herself: Do I stand for what I teach? Do I



believe what I say? The teacher must be able to answer in the affirmative.

What we need more than anything else is not textbooks but text people. It is the personality of the teacher which is the text that the pupils read; the text that they will never forget.³

In the classroom, students watch their teacher interact with others all day long. As such, the teacher must demonstrate those characteristics and behaviours we want our children to emulate. Teachers must exemplify positive problem-solving, respectful behaviour, perseverance, and tolerance.

For instance, when a teacher is just about to show the class a video and the technology fails, how does the role model in front of the class react? Does he demonstrate talking through a problem? Does she acknowledge a mistake, take responsibility, and move to make amends? Does he weigh the pros and cons of various options and think flexibly before coming to a decision? Hopefully, yes to all of the above, because these are the skills needed for good decision-making, and because the teacher's behaviour in the moment is what the children will echo when they face similar situations.

Selecting teachers who are positive role models is a challenge in school-hiring practices. It is so important to watch a teacher candidate interact with students both formally and informally, and beyond pedagogy, to discuss the candidate's understanding of child development and role-modelling. These considerations should be embedded in the school's ongoing critical assessment and supervision of the teachers it hires.

Supervisors should ask: Is the teacher authentic and comfortable with who she is? Does he appear happy and at ease at school? Is she proud of her Jewish identity and happy to celebrate it? Is he knowledgeable and passionate about his work? Are students flourishing in her class? The answers to these questions continuously transmit potent messages to the students, both verbally and non-verbally.

Students, who trust and admire their teachers, stretch themselves academically and reach for excellence.

A good teacher role models compassion and collaboration to a variety of ends. The teacher mindfully intends to connect with each student and to understand each student's learning style so that lessons optimize each child's chance to learn. The relationship may proceed from finding out a student's extracurricular interests or chatting with the child at recess. Empathy grounds the all-important teacher-student relationships. It is also foundational to teaching ethics, respect, and self-discipline. Students have to see and feel that their teachers care.

Our Jewish sages understood the critical importance of the teacher as the person responsible for imparting our ethics, values, knowledge, and understanding to our children on a daily basis. They understood the importance of providing even our youngest students with a framework for living. In the discussions that still ensue on the causes of the riots in England this past summer one common thread has been identified: the sense of aimlessness and despair experienced by youths in those communities. They were not raised in a framework of positive social values, nor with a sense of hope or purpose.

Our teachers are taught to view each child as *B'zelem Elokim* (in the image of God). Imagine the attitude and atmosphere this automatically creates. Each student, each child, is created in God's image and is therefore holy. No one more, and no one less. From this awesome beginning, the teachers can begin their work. When children feel respected and honoured for just being themselves, they are more able to relax and they are more receptive to learning.

Teachers who pay attention to the emotional lives of their students are often those who see the most academic growth in their classes. The mental state of "relaxed alertness" is optimum for learning; the same part of the brain that controls emotion governs memory. We all best remember things that had an emotional component. Some of us remember where we were when we heard that Princess Diana had died. Some remember precisely how Team Canada won Gold in the Vancouver Olympics. In school we want to associate learning with emotions of joy and curiosity. Not only will it make the learning more meaningful, but also it will make the learning last much longer.

Students have to see and feel that their teachers care.

Good role models raise school standards. When teachers create positive and respectful relationships with their students, they institute high-functioning classrooms with students who are ready to learn. In turn, this expedites expectations and meaningful criteria for academic achievement. Students, who trust and admire their teachers, stretch themselves academically and reach for excellence.

1 Nancy Carlsson-Paige, ed., *Taking Back Childhood* (New York: Hudson Street Press, 2008); Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009). || 2 See, for example, Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2007); and "Powerful Words," Dr. Robyn J.A. Silverman's *Powerful Parenting Blog*, www.drobynsilverman.com/powerful-words/ || 3 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *I Asked for Wonder: A Spiritual Anthology of Abraham Joshua Heschel*, ed. by Samuel H. Dresner (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983).

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INSPIRING JEWISH STUDENTS TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE



DEVELOPING SCIENTIFIC THINKERS

The McEwen Centre for Regenerative Medicine launches educational outreach

By Lisa Richler

Beginning in kindergarten, Toronto Heschel School teachers methodically teach their students to hypothesize, ask questions, look for evidence, and draw conclusions in order to gain knowledge about their world and universe. The school prioritizes the natural sciences through an interdisciplinary environmental studies ethos grounded in *Tikkun Olam* and teaches its students to think critically and explore creatively from a very young age. In essence, the students learn to think like scientists.

According to Greg Beiles, Director of The Lola Stein Institute and Curriculum Consultant at The Toronto Heschel School, teaching students to think like scientists is essential in preparing them for the future.

Our goal is to develop students as thinkers... to be curious, not be afraid to take on the unknown and to ask questions, to learn through experimentation and analysis.

"It is not enough to simply deliver content," Greg explains, "because content in science and technology is changing so quickly. Our goal is to develop students as thinkers.

We help them to be curious, not be afraid to take on the unknown and to ask questions, and we give them the skills to learn through experimentation and analysis."

This November, the school's Grade 8 students will meet some of the world's most innovative scientists, and they will be the first to take part in an educational open house at the McEwen Centre laboratories. The Centre includes 15 medical scientists who have made tremendous strides over the past five years in finding treatments for heart, lung, blood, and neurological diseases, as well as diabetes. McEwen Centre scientists are using stem cells to repair, regenerate, and replace diseased cells, tissues, and organs.

In layperson's terms, stem cells are like the body's building blocks. They are unspecialized cells that can divide and differentiate into a variety of specialized cell types and they can self-renew to produce more stem cells. In the early 1960s, Toronto scientists James Till and Ernest McCulloch were conducting experiments at the Ontario Cancer Institute when they first discovered stem cells in bone marrow that produced colonies of specialized blood cells. Their discovery led to the first bone marrow transplants.

Fifty years later, scientists at the McEwen Centre have figured out how to *reprogram* stem cells and turn them into specific types of cells. Students participating in the McEwen Centre educational outreach initiative will see something extraordinary: a Petri dish full of beating heart cells – cells that were once stem cells but which have been *coaxed* into becoming functioning heart cells.

Dr. Gordon Keller, Director of the McEwen Centre, first began working with stem cells in mice 20 years ago. Dr. Keller recalls that back then "there was nothing in the textbooks [about how to direct stem cells to become a specific type of cell]. We had to start from scratch." Through "blood, sweat, and tears," Dr. Keller and his colleagues discovered a *recipe* for making heart cells: by adding proteins and growth factors to stem cells, they transformed stem cells into beating heart cells.

Dr. Keller recalls... "there was nothing in the textbooks... We had to start from scratch."

As a result of this remarkable breakthrough, scientists now have an unlimited supply of heart cells at their fingertips. In the short term, these heart cells can be used to study heart disease and to safely test new medications long before they are ever given to patients. In the long term, scientists might be able to repair a patient's damaged heart cells with healthy cells and restore normal function to a diseased heart.

The McEwen Centre team has made major strides in treating respiratory and neurological diseases. The scientists have increased the number of donor lungs available for transplantation by repairing lungs previously thought to be unusable for transplant. To date, over 40 lung transplants with "regenerated lungs" have been successfully conducted on patients who would otherwise still be on waiting lists. The team is also using stem cells to heal injured spinal cords, by repairing damaged neurons with nerve stem cells.

Dr. Keller and his colleagues have also discovered how to transform stem cells into insulin-producing pancreatic cells. This groundbreaking achievement gives hope to the millions of people worldwide who suffer from type 1 or juvenile diabetes and are unable to produce insulin.

The Toronto Heschel School is thrilled to be partnering with Dr. Keller to pilot an educational outreach program at the McEwen Centre. The project will teach students about scientific research that is groundbreaking, life-saving, and happening in our city. Dr. Keller says it's a thrill to go to work every day. He promises that when

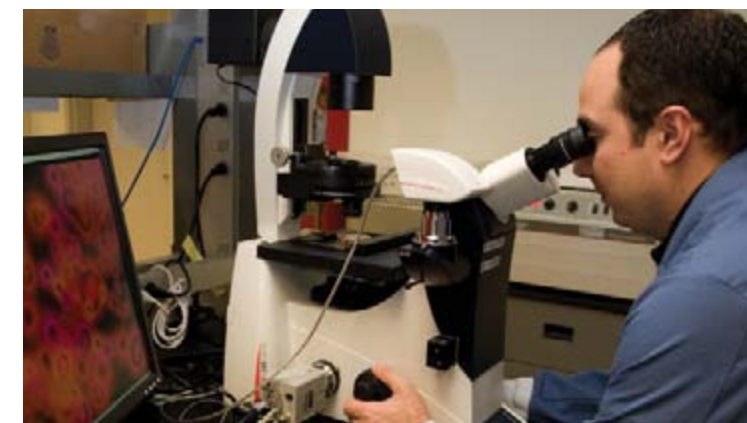
the Heschel students visit the McEwen Centre labs, "We will excite them!"

Dr. Keller was named one of 25 Transformational Canadians by the *Globe and Mail*, CTV, and *La Presse* in 2010, an honour given to "living citizens who have made a difference by immeasurably improving the lives of others." We might dream that our own children make this kind of meaningful contribution to the world when they grow up. For students to wonder at the possibilities of science, they need to first be fascinated by the world around them; and to think like scientists, they must understand what investigation means.

For students to wonder at the possibilities of science, they need first to be fascinated by the world around them; and to think like scientists, they must understand what investigation means.

Enthusiastic professionals like Dr. Keller are role models we want our students to meet: passionate scientists devoted to exploration and discovery. The thrill of discovery is a central educational goal at Toronto Heschel, and this pilot project with the McEwen Centre provides the kind of educational moment that will imprint itself on a student's memory for years.

We are developing scientific thinkers. This adventure into the laboratory may inspire our students to one day ask the questions and pursue the answers that will make yet another immeasurable difference in our world.



The McEwen Centre scientists are striving to improve treatments for heart, lung, blood, and neurological disease, as well as diabetes.

Some of their groundbreaking achievements include:

- transforming stem cells into beating heart cells that can be used to study heart disease and safely test new medications, and potentially repair diseased heart cells
- transforming stem cells into insulin-producing pancreatic cells that might lead to a cure for juvenile or type 1 diabetes
- conducting over 40 lung transplants with "regenerated lungs" that otherwise would not have been possible
- developing treatments for spinal cord injuries using nerve stem cells



CREATING A CLASSROOM COMMUNITY

How to construct a learning environment that enhances student potential

By Heidi Friedman

How does a classroom of children and their teacher become a functional and supportive learning community?

Let's examine the meaning of two key words: intentional and message. The definitions of these two words are central to creating a cohesive classroom community.

The *Meriam-Webster Dictionary*, 11th edition, defines these as follows:
intentional: 1: done by intention or design
message: 1: a messenger's mission 2: a communication in writing, in speech, or by signals 3: an underlying theme or idea

If we examine the meaning of the words intentional and message together, our first understanding is that the messenger's mission is established by design. In the context of a classroom, the messenger is the teacher. It is the teacher's responsibility to articulate her classroom's mission. A core tenet of The Toronto Heschel School is to create a supportive community based on integrity and respect. We believe this begins in the classroom. The intentional messages

a teacher sends are the foundation for creating a purposeful and caring classroom community.

When we examine the definition of message, we see that it is described as a form of verbal and non-verbal communication, and both are fundamental when creating a classroom community.

In a community-oriented classroom, a teacher facilitates a group dialogue about community life, reflecting and talking with the children about difficulties within the community. Lesley Koplow (a psychotherapist, director of the Center for Emotionally Responsive Practice at Bank Street College of Education, and author of numerous books on child mental health) writes in *Creating Schools that Heal*:

To facilitate group dialogue that can help consolidate classroom communities, teachers have to avoid relying on phrases such as "We're all friends in school," and "In our class everyone can kick the ball far." Although those phrases may communicate the teacher's values, they

do not acknowledge the dynamic that is taking place among the children; thus the children are left to their own devices except in the particular moment that the teacher is intervening.¹

Koplow explains that it is more effective for teachers to say, "It looks like children only want to work with their best friends and are leaving other children feeling left out." She believes it is more powerful to say, "Every time we play a game that involves teams, the same children get picked right away because they are known as the 'best kick-ball players,' while other children never get an opportunity to play the key positions, so they never get the practice they need to become kick-ball experts."²

A functional classroom community forms the foundation for all learning experiences. It heightens children's potential to learn and grow – academically, socially, and emotionally.

Koplow believes that when a teacher discusses a dynamic that is happening within the classroom community and addresses it simply and honestly, she invites the children to do the same. It is the role of the teacher to mention the community problem-solving process in the preface to the discussion. The teacher could say: "I want to bring up a problem that I have noticed in our classroom. I would like us to talk about it, and brainstorm together why it is happening and see how we can change things. During the conversation if you have an idea that may hurt someone's feelings, I would like you to keep it to yourself, and talk to me later in private."³

Initially the teacher role-models this action by initiating the dialogue and is not afraid to talk about issues in the classroom. In a community-oriented classroom, when an issue occurs, it is viewed as a teachable moment and a learning opportunity not to be missed. A teacher is a mirror for the children, and models how to express frustrations and how to communicate in a respectful manner, all the time taking care of each member's feelings.

The key is that it is a dialogue, and the children are critical contributors to the conversation. It is not a monologue given by the teacher, but a genuine desire to join together with the children and discuss their shared community existence.

As a society we live within community – a classroom community is modelled on how we envision our larger community. Classroom community teaches children the skills of how to live with others, how to respect, dialogue, and how to interact with others who are

similar to and different than themselves. John Dewey was an influential educational reformer, and one of the most important representatives of the progressive schooling philosophy of the 20th century. He writes in *Experience and Education*:

Most children are naturally sociable... A genuine community life has its ground in this natural sociability. But community life does not organize itself in an enduring way purely spontaneously. It requires thought and planning. The educator is responsible for a knowledge of individuals and for a knowledge of subject-matter that will enable activities to be selected which lend themselves to social organization, an organization in which all individuals have an opportunity to contribute something.⁴

Dewey believes that education is intrinsically linked to experience, and experience is created through interaction. He sees education as a social process. The quality of the experience is directly linked to the strength of the group.

In a community-based classroom, a teacher strives to create a climate of authentic and meaningful interactions. She spends time observing children in her class, being a present force. Social interactions, classroom discussions, and play habits provide a real insight into the world of the child. The teacher uses her observations to engage in a purposeful and meaningful dialogue with the children and as a spring board for deepening their learning experience. In this manner quality interactions are built. Children are sent a strong message that their thoughts, interests, successes, and struggles are both seen and valued, and are worthy of further exploration.

A teacher is a mirror for the children, modelling how to express frustration and communicate respectfully, while taking care of each member's feelings.

Although Dewey connects education to experience, he writes in detail how an educator must differentiate between experiences that are educationally worthwhile and those that are not. In a community-oriented classroom, an educator believes that shared experiences are powerful tools to building community. There are endless day-to-day life experiences that provide opportunities for interactive dialogue. For example, when a student accidentally spills a bottle of water and everyone giggles, students can talk about how the spiller feels, how the onlookers can take care of the spiller's feelings, and how everyone can respond practically by



helping to clean up the mess. Also, the class can work together to write and illustrate a story about all of their spills. The “book” can be placed in the class library to be read and reread by the community members. A “regular” life experience becomes a powerful teaching and community-building tool.

Another strong non-verbal message sent to children about community life comes through how the classroom is set-up. Prior to the school year our teachers think carefully about community culture, how to set up their classroom spaces, and what message about community they will send. Our classrooms have circular carpets – a sacred space where classroom community members can gather. The circle shape is an intentional symbol of wholeness; when seated around it, everyone is equal and visible. Our teachers see the classroom as a shared space, inhabited by both teacher and children and reflecting their shared existence.

This reflection is enhanced by what is displayed on the walls, and what children bring from home to share. They spend approximately seven hours a day in their classroom, an intentional teacher is acutely aware that what is on the walls seeps into their psyche.

Classroom community teaches children to live with others; how to respect and interact with those similar to and different than themselves.

In a Heschel classroom children feel ownership of their space. They bring books and display items to the classroom, they create signs and post lists. The teacher takes the children's ideas seriously, and this is reflected in both what they bring and what the group decides to post. For example, during a community meeting about *block corner play*, a child may suggest creating a block corner rotation list. When a teacher takes this seriously, asks the child to make the suggested list, and then posts it in the block corner, a powerful message is delivered which implicitly conveys to the children that their space is a collaborative one. When a teacher posts photos of children working cooperatively, helping and listening to one another, laughing together, or engaged in a communal project, the content of these photos sends the message that these behaviours are valued.

In a classroom where deep community relationships are a priority, the teacher thinks carefully about routines and how both the children and the teacher will interact during these routines. For example, young school children eat a snack on a daily basis. Initially, eating a snack may not attract in-depth analysis: one assumes children need to eat something during the day to sustain their energy.

However, in an intentional classroom with a focus on community, the teacher decides how to conduct the snack routine, how the children and teacher will sit, and what they will talk about. Snack time might take place on the carpet with everyone seated in a circle. The teacher can encourage the children to initiate informal conversation and ask individuals to jump in at their leisure. This sends numerous messages about how we all, children and adults, gather together and eat, how we engage in conversation initiated by child or adult, and how we share our interests and lives together



informally. It seems a simple interaction, yet the cumulative effect contributes much to nurturing classroom community.

A classroom culture is built layer upon layer. Community is rooted in the presence of each member and so questions arise when a classmate or teacher is not present. Making a group call on a speakerphone, sending cards or letters will let the missing member know his/her absence is felt and that the community cares about him/her.

Community-oriented classrooms begin the day with a twenty-to thirty-minute Morning Meeting. This is a sacred time when the class gathers together in a circle on the carpet talking and listening to one another. In *Teaching Children to Care*, Ruth Sidney Charney (a master educator) writes: “Morning Meeting is a daily gathering of the class that builds group cohesion and an attentive, responsive community.”⁵

Children share moments in their lives outside of school. For example, they share stories of new babies, of a car being stolen, or of winning or losing a hockey game the night before. This teaches children how to listen to one another, how to probe and ask questions, and how to respond with authentic interest. Charney writes: “Morning Meeting serves as a transition, connecting lives at home to lives in school... It builds community, creates a positive climate for learning, reinforces academic and social skills, and gives children daily practice in respectful communication.”⁶

The Morning Meeting also provides teachers with an opportunity to describe the day's schedule, so there are no surprises. The teacher's management of daily routines and transitions sends children a clear message about how they are being taken care of at school. They like safety and certainty. In our Morning Meeting, we include *tefillah* (prayer) and our day begins consistently and predictably with talking, listening, sharing, and praying together. It sets a good tone for the day.

A functional classroom community forms the foundation for all learning experiences. When children feel connected to others, they feel comfortable and safe to be themselves; they ask questions and take risks. This heightens their potential to learn and grow – academically, socially, and emotionally.

1 Lesley Koplow, *Creating Schools that Heal* (New York: Teacher's College Press, 2002), p. 57. || 2 Ibid. 3 Ibid., p. 58. || 4 John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1997), p. 56. || 5 Ruth Sidney Charney, *Teaching Children to Care* (Turners Fall, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children, 2002), p. 45. || 6 Ibid., p. 47. www

DEBATING

LEARNING TO ARGUE CAN MEAN THE WORLD TO YOUNG TEENS

By Eli Savage

Strangely enough, often the moments that stick in our minds are not memories of split seconds when we did something, but the split seconds when we did nothing. For me, one such moment happened in Grade 10 when I moved from CHAT to public high school. A classmate questioned why Jews made such a big deal every year, publicly crying about the Holocaust, something that happened so long ago. The teacher's silence was deafening as I sat there, blood boiling, the only Jew in the class.

I tried to say something in defence of Holocaust remembrance, but the torrent of emotion swirling in my head prevented me from uttering a single word. I was shocked and angry, and nightmarishly, said nothing. The experience lit a spark. It wasn't that I didn't have an answer. What I lacked was the “habit of mind” to listen carefully and respond confidently and persuasively. At that moment I understood the importance of the skill to argue, and thus began my interest in the art of debating.

Last spring, The Toronto Heschel School debating team invited other day schools to join the first Toronto Jewish Day School Debating Tournament. Over 50 junior high students from RHA Bathurst, Paul Penna Jewish Day School, and The Toronto Heschel School gathered together, unleashed their enthusiasm, and argued with panache. Leo Baeck South sent a team of observers. It was a fun meeting of young minds. It felt healthy, it felt right. Coaches and staff from the participating schools deserve credit for working tirelessly to make this event a success. This coming spring we hope that all the Jewish junior high schools in Toronto will join the debate.

Our sages, Rabbis Hillel and Shammai, were in constant debate and disagreement. Yet, despite their religious differences, they showed each other genuine tolerance and respect. Their relationship serves as a fine model in the search for truth.

I'm looking forward to a great contest in the spring of 2012... one that will continue in the spirit and tradition of our sages.



A few quick points describe why debating is a great sport and a great extracurricular pursuit:

1. Debating enhances confidence. Teammates collaborate to structure their opening statements, build supporting points for their argument, and share ideas to link their cases to concrete examples. Participants learn to stand up and respond powerfully to opposing arguments. I particularly enjoy watching the students practise self-control in heated situations.
2. Debating develops communication skills. Students learn to isolate an angle in their opponent's case and to attack it directly. With practise, arguments become less personal and more substantive. As students come to express their feelings with intentionality, it affects their overall interaction with others, which can have a positive effect on real-life situations.
3. Debating builds character. Teenagers may naturally argue, but most concede that they rarely win arguments in a proper and disciplined way. Healthy character includes learning to relay personal opinions, to focus, to manage frustrations, and to self-regulate impulsivity. These life skills are the cornerstones of the debating technique.
4. Debating is mindful. Debaters slow down and think. Today's rapid-fire e-mail and texting communications encourage our teens to respond immediately with messages that are neither thought through nor filtered. Debating empowers students to formulate their thoughts methodically and gives them the chance to see the difference that pre-meditation offers. Debaters speak, then sit and listen closely to their opponents. These skills transfer to interactions in all areas of their lives.

Winning members of the Robbins Hebrew Academy team pictured here with their coach.

HARNESSING THE POWER OF RELATIONSHIPS:

THE SECRET KEY TO EDUCATION AND JEWISH CONTINUITY By Dan Goldberg, Ph.D.

My grandfather was fond of quoting the Greek scientist and inventor Archimedes, who in the third century B.C.E. said: “Give me a place to stand and I will move the earth.” When Archimedes made this bold statement, he was referring to the ability of the simple lever to convert the limited strength of an ordinary human being into a force that could almost literally move mountains. I have always been intrigued by Archimedes’ claim. How does one move mountains without the use of power tools or dynamite? How does one make a positive impact in a large and troubled world?

Central to Jewish tradition is a communal effort to make a difference in the world. As members of the Jewish community, we are linked to one of the most ambitious goals ever conceived. To speak in the terms of Archimedes, our ultimate goal as Jews is to move the earth – or at least to transform it through *Tikkun Olam*. Although at some point along the way most of us come to accept that we will not be able to finish the task, our tradition teaches that we are not free to abandon the effort. More importantly, Judaism provides us with powerful tools to help us do our share. Thanks to the longest sustained effort in human history, our community has moved the world, and we have done it more than once.

We must pay attention to what happens – or fails to happen – at the juncture between givers of Torah and their intended recipients.

Certainly one of our primary levers as a community is the Torah and all that it represents (i.e., the teachings and values that have been derived from it). We should not let its age and familiarity obscure the fact that the Torah was and remains a revolutionary document which transformed the ancient world, shaped Western values and morality, and continues to guide and challenge us both communally and individually.

In spite of its wisdom and insight, the Torah remains little more than a book (or scroll) on a shelf until someone is motivated to pick it up and use it. The miracle at Sinai would mean very little today if the gift that was given there had not been transmitted to the generations that followed. Therefore, if the Torah is a lever for moving the world, then our primary means of harnessing this potential is the education of our children. An investment in Jewish education is an investment in virtually everything we care about most – our children, the continuity of our tradition and community,



and *Tikkun Olam*. Providing an effective Jewish education for our children may be our best shot at ensuring a positive future for them and for the planet.

If we consider the giving of the Torah as a paradigm, we can see that Jewish education is a transformative process that, at its core, is a replication of the revelation at Sinai. Every time a Jewish child (or adult) makes that sacred connection to his/her community and tradition, the Torah has been given, and received, once again. Every time the torch that was first lit at Sinai gets passed to another generation, the miracle that first took place over three 3,000 years ago is renewed.

Fire is an apt metaphor for this process because a Jewish education is about far more than teaching knowledge and skills. It is about inspiration. It is about lighting a fire – a fire that burns so powerfully and so urgently that to not act on it, to not live by it, would be unthinkable. In my opinion, a Jewish education that accomplishes any less cannot be called successful. A child who is not inspired and transformed by his/her Jewish education will not grow up to feel a connection with the community or the tradition, will not live a life guided by Jewish values, and will not raise committed Jewish children.

With Jewish education, the stakes are high. Much is required and there is much that can go wrong. Nevertheless, in no generation since Moses has the educational process failed to ensure the survival of our community and our tradition. The fact that you are now reading an article in a Jewish publication is powerful evidence that the process succeeded with you. I am not saying that you necessarily liked the Hebrew school or day school you attended. You may have hated it. Or perhaps you never received a formal Jewish education. However, I would argue that at some point in your Jewish development, a positive connection was made. Someone in your Jewish past touched and inspired you in a powerful way.

I say “someone” because the transmission of Torah always involves another person. It is my observation and deeply held belief that Torah is always, and only, transmitted in the context of a caring human relationship. This does not mean that one cannot learn from books or sermons or TV or the Internet. We all do. But the primary transformative connection – the experience that opens one’s mind and one’s heart – always occurs in connection with another human being. In fact, I would go as far as to say that all committed Jews can identify at least one individual in their history who gave them Torah. It might have been a parent or grandparent, or a rabbi, teacher, or friend. Maybe the connection occurred in childhood, maybe later on. Some of us have been fortunate enough to have had more than one person. There are as many stories as there are Jews, and every single story is different and yet the same. The individuals and details vary, but in each case the common denominator was a meaningful, caring relationship with another human being.

The transmission of Torah from one person to another has a transformative power that cannot be overestimated. I know about this power because I have experienced it firsthand.

Torah is always, and only, transmitted through a caring human relationship.

Zachary Merrin was a short, overweight, bald man with the slightest hint of something foreign in his almost perfect North American accent. Before coming to Beth El Congregation in Phoenix, Arizona, where he served as the educational director for 17 years, he worked as a chemist. Merrin never wrote a book, never published an article, and, to my knowledge, had no professional ambition beyond running our Hebrew school. I am not exaggerating when I say that I have never encountered a more passionate, caring, or inspiring Jewish educator than Zachary Merrin.

Mr. Merrin (as we called him) transmitted Torah and, in the process, he transformed lives. Today his students are scattered around the world, serving formally and informally as Jewish educators and leaders. Wherever his former students go, they play Jewish geography with a hopeful enthusiasm: “So you’re from Phoenix! What shul did you go to? What years were you there?” Then comes the critical question: “Did you know the Merrins?” (We also loved his wife Jackie, the teacher who taught me how to read Hebrew.) When that question is greeted with a smile of recognition, the bond is instantaneous. Three decades after his death, a remarkable percentage of Merrin alumni continue to thrive as active and committed members of the Jewish community. In a thousand places and in a thousand ways, the disciples of Zachary Merrin are striving toward *Tikkun Olam*.

As far as I know, Zachary Merrin never distilled his techniques into an integrated philosophy of Jewish education. He was a natural. He left no identifiable legacy other than the incredible impression he made on the teachers he mentored and the students who attended

his school. So what was Mr. Merrin’s secret? What is the secret that transformed my life and gave me a direction and purpose that guide me to this day? Zachary Merrin’s secret was that when he looked into the eyes of one of his students – and, at one point or another, he did look – what he saw was not a kid who wasn’t paying attention or a mischief-maker or even the smartest kid in the class. What Mr. Merrin saw was a reflection of God.

Zachary Merrin understood that Jewish education, distilled to its essence, is a divine encounter. He looked into the faces of his students and saw the presence of God. And each of us looked into his eyes and saw a reflection of the very best that we had the potential to become. The effect of that interaction was permanent. From that point on, we were ready to engage with whatever content Mr. Merrin wanted to share. More importantly, we saw in ourselves a value that could never be taken away.

In spite of what the Torah teaches about humanity being made in God’s image, most of us do not perceive ourselves as sacred beings – not in our adult lives and certainly not as children. Children often grow up focused on their inadequacies, wishing that they were different in some way – taller or stronger or smarter or more athletic or more artistic or more outgoing. Schools often reinforce this sense of inadequacy by failing to see, accept, and value their students for who they are. When a Mr. Merrin looks beyond performance and behaviour, beyond strengths and weaknesses, and sees a student’s true essence, the ramifications are enormous.



It is my long-term observation that Jewish education tends to focus on Jewish content while borrowing its methods from the world of secular education. However, Jewish educators who try to teach Jewish content in the absence of Jewish values are, in my opinion, ignoring the very content they are attempting to teach. At the heart of that content is the beautiful and revolutionary idea that human beings are made in God’s image. A teacher who skips over that idea or tries to present it intellectually without modelling it interpersonally has missed the point, and so will his/her students. On the other hand, a Zachary Merrin, who brings this value to life for his students, inspires a cadre of ambassadors who will carry the values of Torah not only in their minds but also in their hearts, souls, and actions.

At the heart of Jewish continuity is a sacred juncture – a potential barrier or link in the life of every Jew – that must be crossed successfully if there is to be a positive connection with our tradition and our community. In our generation, much consideration has been given to the knowledge and skills which our community seeks to transmit to its offspring. Less consideration has been given to the relationship and process through which this content is transmitted. As Jewish educators and parents, I believe we need to pay very close attention to what happens – or sometimes fails to happen – at the juncture that exists between givers of Torah and their intended recipients. Understanding, supporting, and harnessing the power of this potentially miraculous and life-altering transaction may be the key to our future.

ACTIONS & ATTITUDES: THE PERFORMANCE OF JEWISH VALUES BEGINS WITH GOOD EDUCATION

By Rabbi Howard Morrison

When I was a rabbinical student attending the Jewish Theological Seminary in the 1980s, I took many courses and attended many lectures and seminars on Jewish education. I am not an expert, but as a congregational rabbi and father of two sons, I have given much thought to Jewish education.

One of the early seminars I attended as a student rabbi questioned the purpose of Jewish education: Was Jewish education meant to be informational or transformational? I opted then and I opt now to answer that the best Jewish education is transformational.

The best Jewish education is transformational.

It is insufficient to simply provide data and content. Education must utilize information to transform students' Jewishness in a meaningful way. Our lives should be changed by the education we receive, whether that transformation is in terms of spirituality or morality, ritual observance, thoughtfulness, or consciousness.

Another seminar I attended was led by a respected Jewish educator, Professor Saul Wachs. He asked us to reflect on what we would elect to study if we had to choose either learning Hebrew language, learning the ceremonies of Jewish holidays and lifecycles, or gaining scholarly access to Judaic texts and sources. I chose learning Jewish sources. I felt that a grasp of our sacred literature would be my key



for opening up everything else Jewish. Today I would make the case for a Jewish education focused on the performance of *middot*.

Over the decades, I have seen many school curricula focused as Professor Wachs described: language-based curricula, ceremonies-based curricula, values-based curricula, and also *mitzvot*-based curricula. I now understand that the inculcation of *middot* is what is desperately needed in Jewish educational settings. It's not that *middot* deliver where others fail. *Middot* are placed in an additional and independent category of thought and go beyond rote learning or rote practise.

Recently, educators have begun to write and speak about the meaning of *middot* in relation to *mitzvot* and values. My colleague, Rabbi Steven Bayar, wrote on this topic in *The Ultimate Jewish Teacher's Handbook*. He says, "*Middot* might be considered as guidelines on how to carry out our deeds and how to best interact with others, with ourselves, and with God."¹

"Practising middot gives us an opportunity to enrich, inspire, and help the lives of others."

– Rabbi Steven Bayar

He explains that *mitzvot*, succinctly put, are the commandments, laws, and rules; that values are the standards of behaviour deduced through study of the *mitzvot*; and that *middot* are the methods of performance. *Middot* are the actions and attitudes that our values require and encourage us to assume.

Middot are the positive actions to perform and the attitudes to maintain if we are to activate the commandments and put the lofty ideals of our tradition into daily practice. For example, giving *tzedakah* is a *mitzvah*. To be charitable is a Jewish value. The *middah* is to encourage regular placement of coins in a *pushke*. So we ask: Do students in our classrooms pass around a *tzedakah* box every day? Do parents at home encourage their children to empty their pockets of change into a *tzedakah* box prior to lighting Shabbat candles?

***Mitzvot* are the laws and rules.
Values are the standards of behaviour.
Middot are the actions and attitudes that
our values require us to assume.**

Hachnasat orchim is a *mitzvah*, and to be hospitable is a Jewish value. In one of the Torah's earliest sources on performing acts of loving kindness, the matriarch to be, Rebecca, graciously quenches the thirsts of Abraham's servant and his camels. The combination of her actions and her enthusiasm may be an ancient example of performing *middot*.

Years ago, I heard a rabbi giving a sermon on the challenge faced by religious Jewish singles in meeting one another. A young man had

approached him hoping to meet a young woman who observed Jewish laws to meticulous detail. The rabbi responded to the young man by saying, "I understand your 'frum-o-meter,' but don't you care about a person's *middot*?" Namely, don't you care about her qualities of compassion, generosity, sensitivity, and kindness? He put soul into the equation. All humanity is created *B'Tzelem Elokim*, in the image and likeness of God, and so the qualities of the human soul synthesize with the qualities of the divine. *Middot* reveal the soul.

Through performing *middot* we give form and flavour to the *mitzvot* and the values of our precious Jewish heritage.

What, then, are *middot*? How do they differ from *frumkeit*, observance, and other words we frequently use? One explanation posits that *middot* are divine qualities or attributes which are also qualities or attributes of the human soul. One of my favourite lists of *middot* comes from the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sotah, 14a:

Follow the Lord your God (Deuteronomy 13:5). What does this mean? Is it possible for a mortal to follow God's presence? The verse means to teach us that we should follow the MIDDOT (attributes) of the Holy One, praised be He. As God clothes the naked, you should clothe the naked. The Torah teaches that the Holy One visited the sick; you should visit the sick. The Holy One comforted those who mourned; you should comfort those who mourn. The Holy One buried the dead; you should bury the dead.

We must all explore the meaning and articulation of *middot*. Through performing *middot* we give form and flavour to the *mitzvot* and the values of our precious Jewish heritage. I have engaged with The Toronto Heschel School as a volunteer consultant and as a parent. I have seen that one of the primary goals of the school's educational philosophy is to provide its students with the theory and practice of developing a life of *middot*. This leads to a transformation that the best education can provide.

¹ Steven Bayar, *The Ultimate Jewish Teacher's Handbook* (Springfield, NJ: A.R.E. Publishing, 2003), p. 1.



FACES OF ART, FACES OF LEARNING

WHO KNEW CHOOSING A SCHOOL COULD BE SO PERSONAL?

By Lainie Rapp

WE COULDN'T LET CONVENIENCE, GEOGRAPHY, AND NEIGHBOURHOOD DICTATE OUR SON'S ACADEMIC FUTURE



My husband and I knew for certain that we wanted our son, Charlie, to attend Jewish Day School. We talked about the educational choices open to us in Toronto over and over again.

Three Jewish Day Schools operate within a 10-minute walk from our home. We visited each at their scheduled open houses. We later met with the principal and the head of each school privately. Following that, I visited each school unannounced to observe parents dropping off and picking up their children at the beginning and end of the school day. We then expanded this process to two additional Jewish Day Schools further afield, outside the geographical boundaries of our day-to-day community.

We needed to love the purpose of the school and to connect to its vision.

When we began our deliberations, my husband and I were both intent on choosing a school close to home: the community where we live, the neighbourhood where our son plays with children on our street, where many families attend the same synagogue, and where most children attend one of the three Jewish Day Schools

nearby. We truly embrace our community and feel very close to the families around us. How convenient our lives would be if we could choose one of these schools!

Weeks passed, months passed. All of our friends had made their decisions, and we were still agonizing. Why was the decision so much more difficult for us? Why did we spend our evenings deliberating over a decision that everyone else had resolved? We admitted that all the schools were "good." We acknowledged that all the schools had "nice families," and we agreed that our son would be happy and do well at any one of these schools.

In today's hectic society, the fundamental parenting premise to respect what is best for our children is not necessarily instinctual. As we make decisions for our children, we contemplate the expense to us, the convenience to us, the reputation, labels, and history of the school, and, of course, our friends' choices. The determination of Charlie's school became so difficult for us because intellectually we knew that convenience, geography, and neighbourhood were not true indicators of what should become our son's academic community. Our minds found the decision to be quite simple, but our hearts were silent.

How easy to be willfully blind to all the choices out there, willfully blind to everything but convenience, and willfully blind to what is actually in the best interest of our son and our family. The decision did not come naturally. Charlie's education mattered to us, yet it didn't seem to matter to others, and that's where we were stuck.

As we sat with the principals discussing their schools, they generously shared their visions, philosophies, and approaches to education. Each conveyed his/her students' successes and explained the measured outcomes of academic achievement. New to the process, my husband and I were highly impressed.

When we met with Gail Baker and Greg Beiles at The Toronto Heschel School, the interview assumed a unique tone at the outset. As we sat down to talk, Ms. Baker looked at us with a warm expression, smiled, and with a pencil and note pad in her lap said, "Tell me about Charlie..."

My husband and I were stunned. No one had once asked us about our son during all the interviews we had attended. Yet here the most obvious question was being asked: "Tell us about your son. Tell us about your Unique Gift of life. Tell us, tell us, tell us..." Neither Gail nor Greg said let us tell you about us.

I needed to see that everything about my son mattered to his school.

Today, a year and a half later, I reflect back on my answer. I told Gail all about Charlie...about his curiosities, his questions, his wonderment at life's miracles, about his soul. I told her about these things because they are what really matters most to us about our son...and, now we realize, that is what matters most to our school and school community.

Choosing a school is the most personal decision a parent can make. The human aspect and the personal touch are more important to me than I ever knew. I hadn't realized that I needed to feel that my child is a welcome part of the whole, a valued member of the community. I needed to see that everything about my son mattered to his school.

Today, my son not only feels that he is a part of the Heschel community, he also feels that he is an important member of a wonderful place. As the feeling has grown, it has nurtured in Charlie a sense of self-worth and a commitment to his school community that makes us laugh with pure joy and feel very proud. And he's only five!

Ms. Baker looked at us with a warm expression and said, "Tell me about Charlie..."

It became clear to my husband and me what it was that was most important to us in a school. We needed to first and foremost love the purpose of the school and to connect to its vision. While we respect that all schools are committed to admirable philosophies of education, we needed to feel the school's commitment to each student. We find Toronto Heschel deeply grounded in its founding vision; a personal holistic commitment to each much loved and unique child. If I am sharing my child with the school's teachers, I need to know they really care.

We understand now that for us the right question wasn't which academic community was best for our child. The right question was whether that community existed.

When children and families are comfortable, happy, and confident in their academic setting, the community blossoms; it becomes a community of shared ideologies, shared visions, and shared strengths. We are thrilled to be a part of a school founded on community, one that sees itself as more than simply a place for children to learn seven hours a day.

For me, Toronto Heschel's communal embrace of MY PARTICULAR CHILD is front and centre. Through all those months of deliberation, I guess we were holding out for the personal touch. We didn't even know.

It continues to be a great source of pride for our family to be part of such a miraculous community. Who knew schools could be so personal?



**Hineni הניני
Here I am**

**The Toronto
Heschel School
Grade 8 mural**



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