

Submission Template

Teacher name Ronit
School name The Toronto Heschel School
Project name Pay It Forward Purim
Age/Grade of students Grade 7 and 8

Tell us about your school and its community

The Toronto Heschel School is a pluralistic independent Jewish day school from junior kindergarten through grade 8 in Toronto, Canada. As a community based Jewish Day School, it respects a wide range of Jewish observances.

The school is named for Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel who is the religious and philosophical inspiration of the school. Heschel believed that in order to be a good Jew, one must first be a good human being, concerned with justice. In this spirit, students at The Toronto Heschel School learn to apply the teachings of the Torah into their daily life both in the school and within the community at large. Rabbi Heschel believed that Jewish ethical values must be applied and lived to every aspect of life.

Describe the heritage, religion, or culture that grounds the curriculum / project / initiative that you are submitting

The Toronto Heschel School is grounded in Judaism as it is seen through the lens of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's writings. Heschel framed the Jewish imperative as a wholehearted search for justice. Heschel's unique contribution to Jewish thought emphasized the personal relationship between the individual and God and so the students study from original text and learn to make meaning from their heritage themselves and to take steps towards justice on a daily basis. Heschel said that when he walked with Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. at Selma, "his legs were praying."

Which value(s) are you hoping to inspire in your students through this curriculum / project / initiative?

The project hopes to inspire the value of righteousness (*Tzedaka*) which includes:

1. respect for all people, each made in the image of God (B'zelem Elokim); and
2. charity to those who need help.

Identify the source(s) of the value(s) you are teaching (text, tradition, ritual, practice, story, etc).

The students study the Book of Esther, *Megillat Esther* where Queen Esther risked her life to save her people.

To celebrate the holiday of Purim, the Megilla tells Jews to give “Matanot L’evyonim”, gifts for the poor and “Mishloach Manot,” gifts of food for one’s friends.

The verse that lists these practices is Esther 9:22

“The days wherein the Jews had rest from their enemies, and the month which was turned unto them from sorrow to gladness, and from mourning into a good day; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, and of sending portions one to another, and gifts to the poor.”

List the learning goals for this project

- The students will study Megillat Esther in preparation for the holiday of Purim;
- The students will consider the positive and negative personal qualities of the people in the story of the Book of Esther;
- The students will draw parallels to leadership performances by leaders in our times;
- The students will step outside of their community, consider how to help people in need around them; the experience will raise consciousness towards homelessness, reduce the stigma of hardship, and inspire the students to seek appropriate solutions;
- The students will then act and fulfill the law of Matanot L’evyonim and Mishloach Manot.

Describe the project

The project has five phases.

1. On the day of Purim itself, when the grade 7 and 8 students read the megillah together and work in small groups to contemplate the personalities in the story, their characteristics and leadership in saving the Jews in Persia from destruction. In keeping with the playful tone of the celebration of Purim, each group creates an art installation portraying a selected Purim character as a modern day figure. For example, one group portrayed King Achashverosh as Rob Ford (Toronto’s former mayor).
2. The children catalyze their learning about noticing and helping people in need, in the Pay it Forward Purim Project. The students are asked to find helpful solutions from within their own capabilities and skills to create and provide gifts for homeless people in Toronto. Last year the students decided to knit scarves and bake granola bars; to activate the entire school community, they collected tangerines, socks, gloves, hats and bottles of water from all grades; they had the younger children create cards with messages of friendship and solidarity. The grade 7 and 8 students packaged the baskets of *Mishloach Manot* in preparation for delivery.

3. One evening, students, parents and teachers meet at the school and receive training for their engagement with street dwellers. The facilitators also provide maps and routes in downtown Toronto and a facilitator accompanies each small group as they go out into the streets of Toronto.
4. Walking the given route in a small group, the student comes upon a street dweller, engages the homeless person, introduces himself/herself and offers two gift baskets. The student explains that one basket is for the recipient to keep and the second is to give to another recipient who will appreciate it. This process continues until whole route is travelled.
5. The next day in class the teacher leads the students through a guided reflection about their experience and what they learned.

Describe the evidence of implementation that you are submitting. This may include student work, photographs, documented class conversations, or anything that shows the learning of the children.

Evidence included is:

- Photos taken throughout the project's implementation;
- Reflections from three perspectives: a student, a parent, and one of the facilitators of the evening program.

Reflections on the Experience

“It felt good seeing homeless people smiling when we gave them the bags of food and blankets. It is important to give to other people, and at Purim when we give mishloach manot to our friends we can also give to people in need.”

“I came to appreciate how other people don’t have as much as we do. And by giving them something we were doing something good for them. We got into interesting conversations with people on the streets and learned so much about them.”

“I learned a lot about the people and how different it is for them. It was rewarding to see the smile on their faces when we gave them the bags. Some of them asked for more than one to give to their friends. It is cool to see how our Jewish traditions can help give these people meaning.”

~ Grade 7 students

“I wish to extend my gratitude to those who organized this event, including Heschel staff, the students for making such wonderful gift baskets and the front-line volunteers who helped deliver the gifts. This experience was meaningful on many levels. Many of us (parents and students) going into it, felt nervous about walking the cold streets of downtown Toronto and initiating interactions with homeless people. It was a wonderful awakening to see how warm, friendly and appreciative people were to receive these gifts. It was also amazing to see that even though the people we met do not have much, they still retain their sense of community by sharing their gifts with others and telling us where else on the street we might find people who would really appreciate the presents. One gentleman preferred to chat and tell his story and even though he was living in a shelter, felt we should save his gift for someone who had even less than him. It was extremely ironic that the only person who was bundled up, lying on a street corner and in my opinion looking the most desperate of the homeless people last night was in fact Jewish. And so it was a night where we were all reminded how powerful our preconceived notions can be and not only how that can affect the lives of others, but just as importantly, how limiting that can be for us too.

By the end of the evening despite the frigid temperatures, many of us did not feel the cold as much as we did in the beginning. That might have been as result of dispelling the myths and shedding our fear as well as the warmth generated from within by the gift of giving.”

~ Parent

“It was a really great experience to work with the staff, students and parents at the school. Our team managed to give away all 35 Mishloah Manot baskets and it was a really positive experience for our group.

Some of the highlights:

1. We met Warren, a Jewish homeless guy who "lives" on the corner of Spadina and Queen. He was very touched by the mishloah manot and blessed the teacher and the rest of the team.
2. We gave out a couple of mishloah manots outside of a youth shelter just west of Spadina on Queen. We then walked away and 2 teenagers who were staying at the shelter followed us and shyly asked us for mishloah manots as well. They were so grateful and blessed us with a happy Purim blessing.
3. One of the big highlights for me was to see how the kids in the group acted so maturely, asked great questions and really seemed to enjoy themselves.”

~ Facilitator







