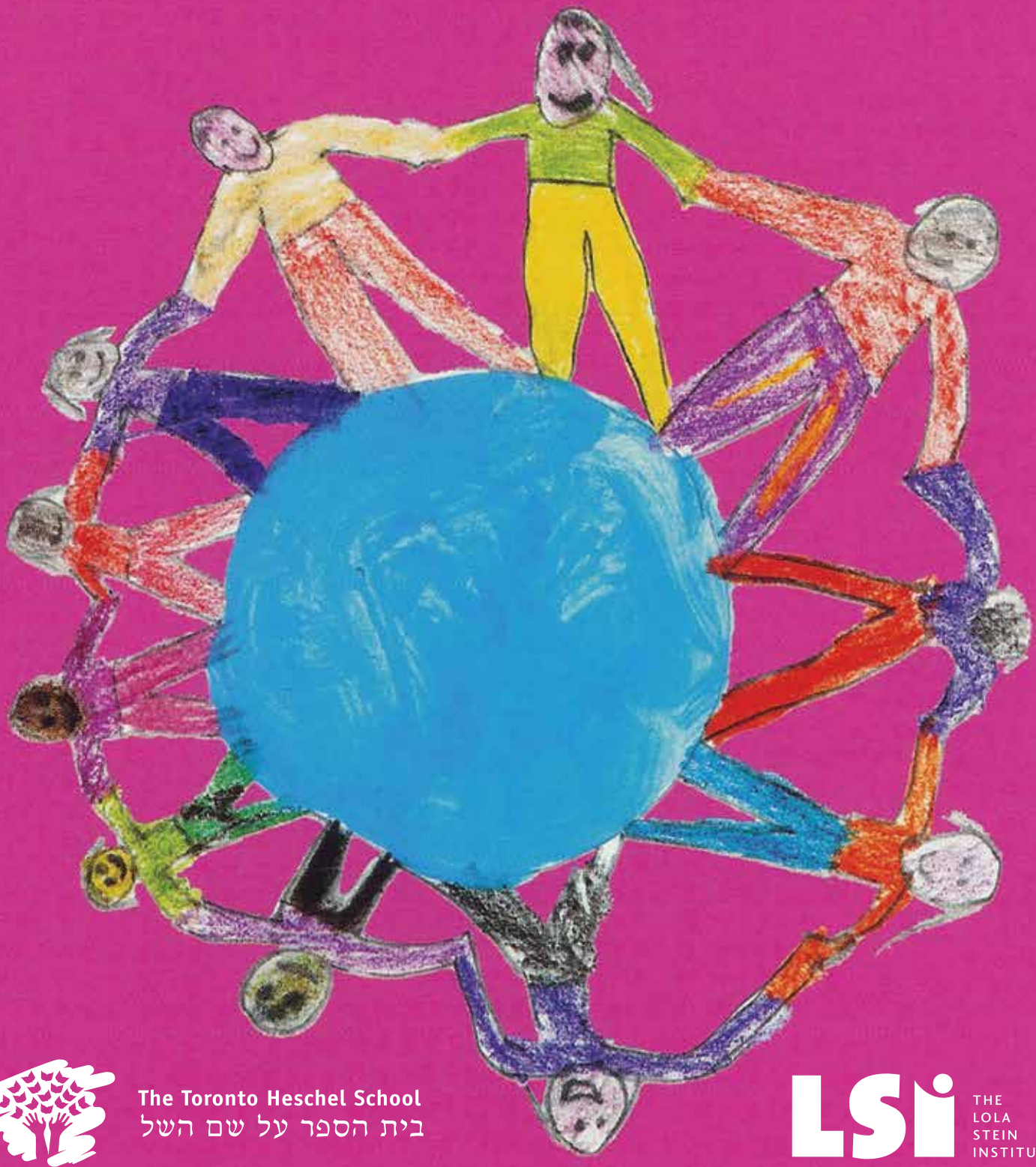
A *THINK* FOCUS ON THE TORONTO HESCHEL SCHOOL

THINK

THE LOLA STEIN INSTITUTE JOURNAL

SPECIAL COLLECTION



The Toronto Heschel School
בית הספר על שם השל

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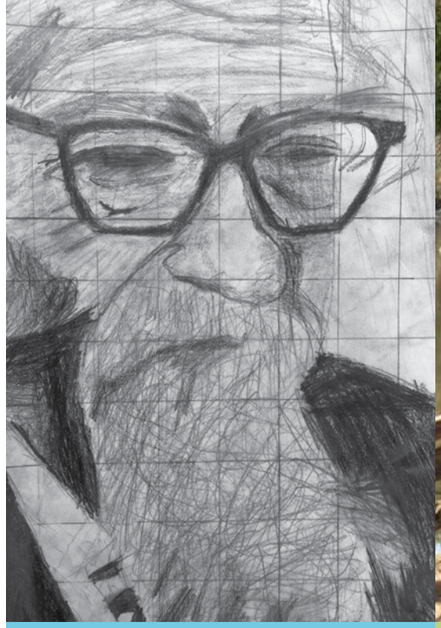
INSIDE COVER
This drawing interprets the work of Marc Chagall and was drawn by a junior high student as part of the Judaics art curriculum.

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

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



Welcome to THiNKHESCHEL

THINKHESCHEL is a collection of articles about the thoughtful and Jewish education delivered at The Toronto Heschel School. This collection features:

- The Vision of The Toronto Heschel School: How it is actualized
- 21st-Century Thinking for Children: Thinking through academic disciplines, through interconnection and synthesis, and through a Jewish lens
- The Role of the Teacher: Educator, mentor, and role model
- Windows into Learning: Examples from the early years, elementary, and junior high programs
- A Parent's Perspective
- Benefits of Jewish Day School

We have drawn these pieces from the past 17 issues of *Think: The Lola Stein Journal*. They help describe what you will find at The Toronto Heschel School and the community that has grown around it.

Since 2008 *Think* has featured leading-edge education that marries academic excellence, Jewish identity, and care of the whole child. *Think* is published and disseminated throughout North America as an ongoing conversation about ethics, education, and our children. The vision of education that *Think* contemplates comes to life at The Toronto Heschel School.

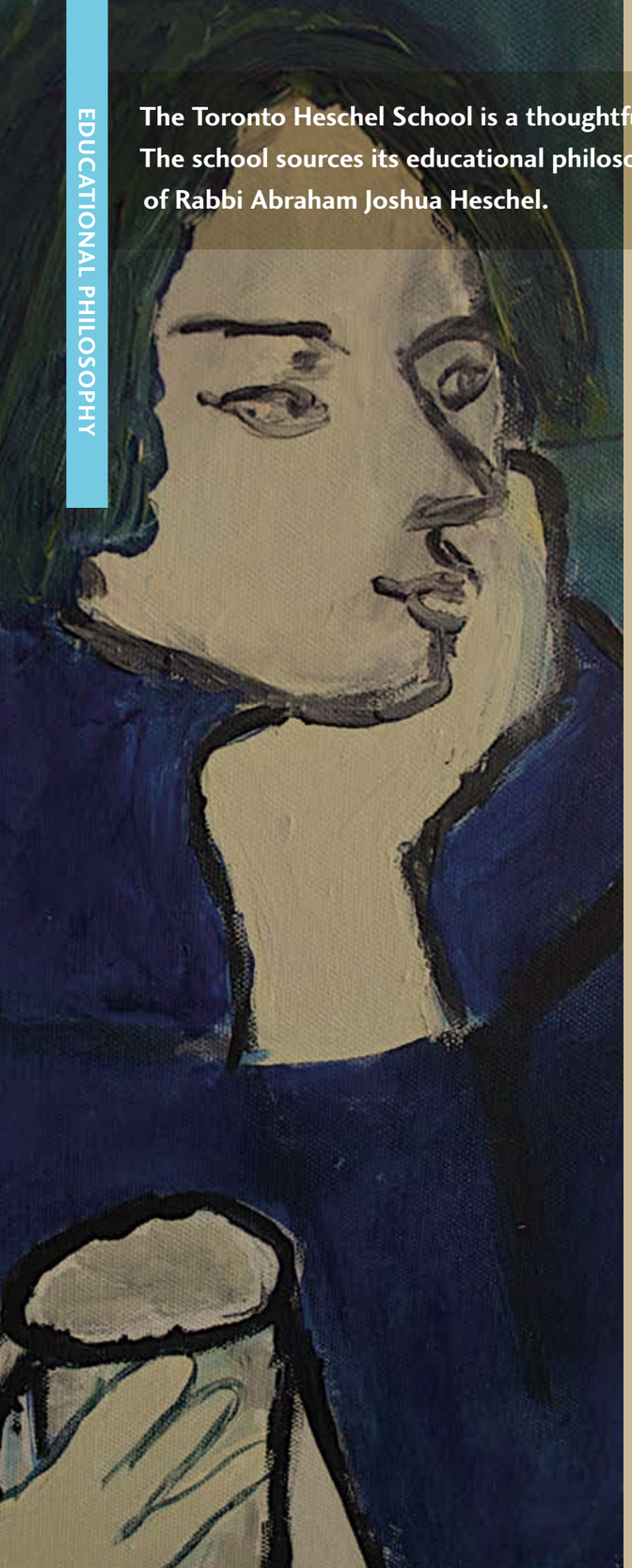
We hope you enjoy this collection as part of your exploration of The Toronto Heschel School.

B'shalom,

Michelle Shulman
Vice-Chair, Lola Stein Institute
Toronto Heschel School Parent

Dvora Goodman
Coordinator, Lola Stein Institute
Toronto Heschel School Parent

For further exploration, past issues of *Think* are available online at www.thinkmag.ca.



The Toronto Heschel School is a thoughtful Jewish school. The school sources its educational philosophy in the ideas and lifework of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.

A Thoughtful Jewish School

WHY RABBI ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL IS OUR INSPIRATION

BY GREG BEILES, HEAD OF SCHOOL

For the past 17 [now 19] years I have had the privilege of being associated with a thoughtful Jewish school. This school might also be described as "dynamic," "innovative," "progressive," "caring," along with many other positive attributes. And yet, when it comes down to it, I refer to it as a "thoughtful" school, and this is what I mean:

A "thoughtful" school is one that is intentional and considerate of all aspects of the educational experience of its students.

A thoughtful school is one based on a well-honed educational philosophy which permeates every aspect of the school, from its choice of curriculum and teaching methods, to the design of its classrooms and timetable, to the way it nurtures its community of teachers, parents, and students.

A *Jewish* school that aspires to be a *thoughtful* Jewish school roots its approach in Jewish thought and a historical Jewish context. It draws from the well of these sources to develop well-considered, well-honed, and authentically Jewish educational practices.

The Toronto Heschel School is a thoughtful Jewish school. It sources its educational philosophy in the ideas and life work of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.

Heschel is best known for combining a deep sense of Jewish spirituality, what he called "awe and wonder," with respect for the dignity of every person "born in the image of God," and with civil activism inspired by the prophetic tradition of the Bible. He strongly supported the American Civil Rights movement, and openly opposed the Vietnam War.

Heschel's relationship and (critical) appreciation of diverse articulations of Judaism—along with his integration of Jewish spirituality and ethical activism—made him a unique figure for his time. It also made him an ideal representative for a school in Toronto that wished to grow from a deeply rooted, authentically Jewish, yet modern educational philosophy.

Each aspect of The Toronto Heschel School connects back to the ideas about Judaism and about the purpose of human existence articulated by Heschel. These ideas were not Heschel's alone; they are, as he himself would readily agree, rooted in ancient Jewish thought and tradition. Yet Heschel was an exemplar of a person who lived and taught these ideas in practice, as a modern Jewish citizen.

The school's pluralistic philosophy emerges from Heschel's trans-denominational experience and his recognition that each stream of Judaism has something to contribute. Heschel's thought echoes the phrase "We were all at Sinai," the traditional Jewish concept that each Jew was present to hear the revelation of the Torah, and therefore each has something authentic to contribute to understanding, discussing, and fulfilling Torah.

Inspired by this idea, each child at The Toronto Heschel School is recognized as a legitimate contributor to classroom discourse. Respecting the unique contribution of each child's questions and comments, classroom seating is arranged in a circle or small groupings; children face one another, and not each other's backs. These practices of respect for the learner and his/her contributions nurture students to ask the best questions when they go on field trips, and inspire graduates to ask questions when they sit in high school classes with students from other schools. These practices make our students recognizable.

Heschel regarded radical amazement—"awe and wonder"—at all of God's creation to be essential for learning. "Wonder not doubt, is the beginning of knowledge," he wrote.[1] For the teachers at The Toronto Heschel School, a classroom that inspires wonder is paramount. For this reason each classroom is designed with objects, texts, and images that spark curiosity, questions, and discussion. Teachers are strongly encouraged to display remarkable objects from nature—a beehive, a conch shell, a magnificently curled *shofar*—that evoke children's natural sense of wonder and inspire investigation. The school's full commitment to environmental stewardship is grounded on Heschel's deep respect for creation, and his view that the natural world is our "sibling," co-created with us,[2] and deserving of our care and concern.

When The Toronto Heschel School looks to educational research to develop its pedagogical practices, it keeps its Jewishly inspired framework foremost in mind. When the school founders investigated Howard Gardener's work on multiple intelligences, they were attracted not simply by its stated pedagogical efficacy but because it reflected Heschel's respect for each human being as a unique learner. Likewise, The Toronto Heschel School's arts-based approach is developed from the recognition that the arts inspire awe and wonder and offer diverse opportunities for exploration and interpretation—Jewish and universal alike.

Heschel was a rigorous thinker, who demanded the highest standards from himself and his students. He placed tremendous emphasis on study, and stated that "learning is decisive" for the purpose of human living. He regarded learning as "a source of adventure" and "a source of joy," and yet believed that the highest purpose of learning was to discover "the importance of self-discipline, the realization, namely, that a life without self-discipline is not worth living."[3]

Educators at The Toronto Heschel School have made Heschel's three purposes for learning the pillars of their educational philosophy—joy, adventure, and self-discipline. These principles apply whether children are learning a text from Torah, engaging in a difficult math question, or learning to pace themselves as they run laps around the school field.

For Heschel, an even higher form of Jewish activity is civic activism; personal dignity, discovered through learning, and other practices of discipline, such as prayer and ritual *mitzvot*, are the preparation. Heschel's writings accentuate the prophetic tradition in Judaism that regards redress of inequity and injustice as core teachings of Torah. Inspired by this vision, The Toronto Heschel School integrates *tzedakah* projects deeply into its curriculum through its Jewish civics program and the graduating class' human rights speeches. Through a school-wide and year-long program, Weekly *Middot* (ethical actions), the concept of *Derekh Eretz* (respect for one another other on a daily basis) is woven deeply into its culture.

Not surprisingly, a thoughtful approach to Jewish education attracts teachers who are looking for a higher standard of Jewish teaching and learning. The Toronto Heschel School is thoughtful not only about how it teaches its students but also how it trains and develops Jewish educators with ongoing training, mentorship, and collaborative planning. And, of course, a thoughtful Jewish school attracts thoughtful Jewish parents, who are also interested in learning for their children's sake and their own.

By nurturing thoughtful educators and families, the thoughtful Jewish school develops not only thoughtful children but also a thoughtful Jewish community at large. A thoughtful education doesn't happen by accident, but by deliberate, painstaking, and rigorous foresight.

1 A.J. Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1951), pp. 11–12.
2 A.J. Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1955), p. 94.
3 A.J. Heschel interview with Carl Stern, in A.J. Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), p. 369.

This article was originally published in *Think*, Issue 14, Fall 2013. For the full article please see thinkmag.ca.

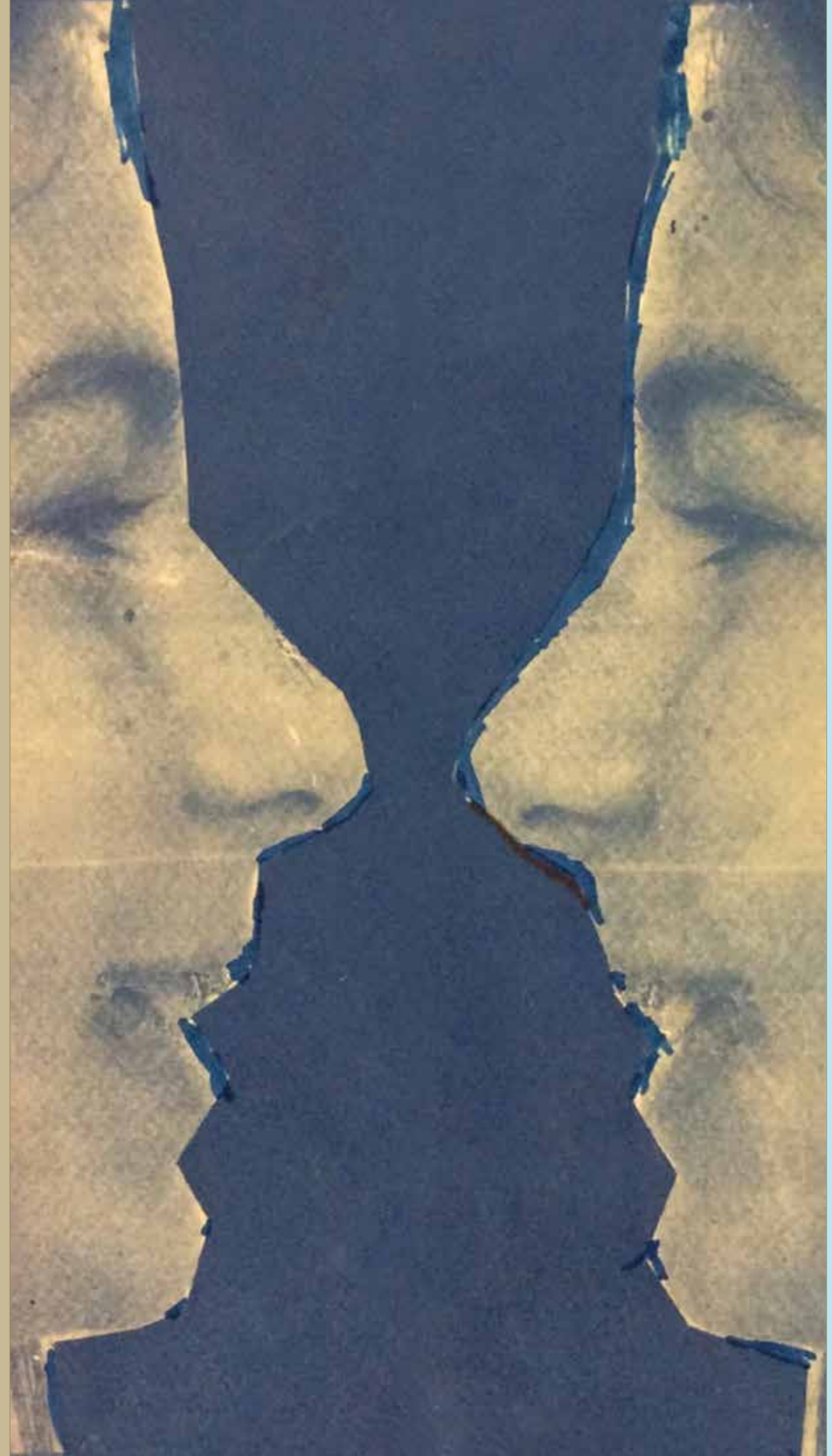
Greg Beiles is Head of The Toronto Heschel School and Director of The Lola Stein Institute.

We prepare each child to participate in society as an informed and motivated Jewish citizen. Each will have a strong academic and ethical foundation and view the world through a Jewish, as well as a universal, lens.

A Sustained Vision

DOUBLE COMMITMENT TO THE INDIVIDUALITY AND JEWISH IDENTITY OF EACH CHILD

BY GAIL BAKER



The beach was strewn with starfish stranded by the retreating tide. An old man walking noticed a young man picking up the starfish one by one and throwing each back into the sea.

He asked, "Why are you doing this?"

The young man replied that the starfish would die if exposed to the morning sun.

"The beach goes on and on and there are thousands of starfish!" the old man cried. "You will not be able to save them all. How can your efforts make a difference?"

The young man looked at the starfish in his hand and quietly replied, "Yes, but to this one, it makes a difference."

This is a story told by the well-known American anthropologist Loren Eisley, and it is one that applies to our school.

When we imagined The Toronto Heschel School, our eyes were on our love for children and for Jewish eternity. We had a very specific vision: We would prepare each child to participate in society as an informed and motivated Jewish citizen. Each would have a strong academic and ethical foundation and each would view the world through a Jewish, as well as a universal, lens.

But how do we sustain this vision?

The breadth and depth of our detailed vision has made our dream school blossom from a small basement premises to a full-sized five-acre campus with its ambitious targets still centred and within our grasp… We make sure that each starfish can enjoy the ocean of opportunity that being Jewish in Toronto offers today.

We parse our goals pedagogically and communally:

1. We pay strict attention to the unique and complex characteristics of each child.
2. We remember how the power of play feeds the alert calmness that is essential for an optimal learning environment. We want our students to understand themselves as both Jewish and Canadian all day long, not Jewish for part of the day and Canadian for the other part. Jewish ethics and values permeate all aspects of our students' lives; we walk the talk.
3. Our vision-driven school is about relationship building. Everyone counts. Students learn ethical behaviour by watching how their teachers and school leaders relate to one another, how school professionals relate to parents, how parents deal with other parents, and how students engage with their peers. Any organization can declare a compelling vision, but without the right people on board and healthy relationships at work, all plans fail. Internet connection cannot substitute for *human* connection. A virtual or digital community may augment but not replace a safe, trusting human community.
4. We embrace the diversity of the Jewish world and are inspired by the teachings of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. We ground the school program in tradition and *halakhah*, and collaborate to respect diverse opinion and modern sensibilities. To make pluralism work, we invoke the ethic of inclusivity and pursue a creative approach that ensures students from all sectors of Jewish observance feel welcome—and warmly so.
5. Our commitment to values and practices affects not only how we teach but also the space between the classes.

One of my earliest and most profound memories at Toronto Heschel brought this point home clearly. One morning, 10-year-old Arielle knocked on my office door looking very distressed. When asked what the problem was, she answered, "We booked my Bat Mitzvah last night."

"But that's exciting," I responded.

"I know," Arielle answered, "but my best friend Rebecca [a Heschel classmate] keeps Shabbat. How is she going to get there?"

I was filled with a sense of awe. Here was a 10-year-old child clearly understanding how the values that we teach must become conscious expressions of all that we do. *Each starfish* matters… From that moment on, we made sure that all Toronto Heschel families could participate in celebrations and that, if necessary, special arrangements would be made.

Summary

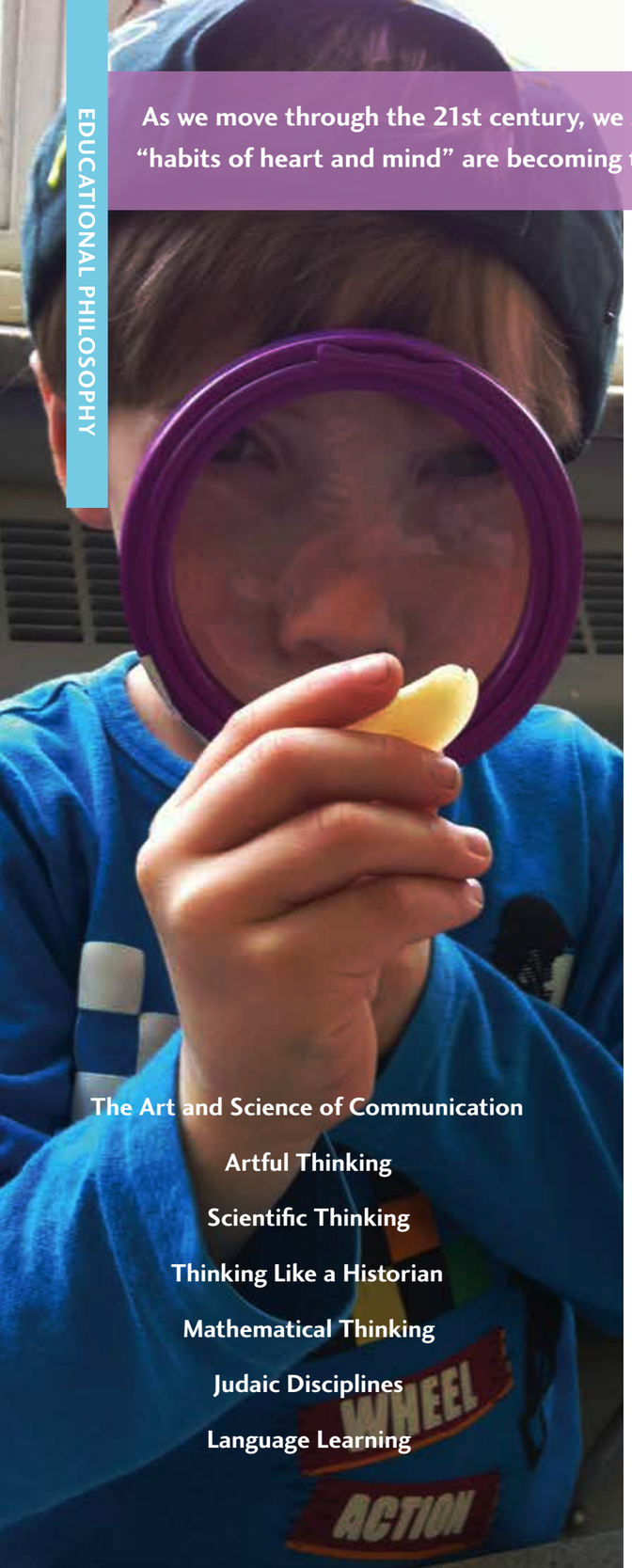
The Toronto Heschel School is rare in its authentic double commitment to the individuality and to the Jewish identity of each child. It is a refreshing, reliable path on the, sometimes scattered, educational landscape.

The school trains teachers to focus on each child to be sure that all children are engaged in understanding both themselves and their studies. We teach students to train their attention on the close and the important.

We want our children to grow up and be successful in life. We want them to find their own song and sing it. With the courage and imagination to value and honour each child—each starfish—we raise Jewish citizens with the skills to cope with life's challenges, the presence of mind to pay attention to what is important, and the motivation to create a more compassionate world.

Adapted from an article originally published in *Think*, Issue 15, Spring 2014.

Gail Baker was a co-founder of The Toronto Heschel School and Head of School from 2001–2014.



As we move through the 21st century, we see that "ways of thinking" or "habits of heart and mind" are becoming the central goals of education.

Education for the Next Generation

USING ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES TO TEACH CHILDREN HOW TO THINK

BY GREG BEILES, HEAD OF SCHOOL

Sir Ken Robinson is an internationally recognized leader in education, creativity, and innovation. He asserts that, as a society, we are no longer certain what our children will need to know to be successful in the future.[1]

Citing the rapid rate of change in society today, Sir Ken has boldly articulated that what students learn today might not be useful tomorrow. He says we don't know what "stuff" or what "information" they will need.

What we can anticipate is that our children will have to be good thinkers and, especially, good learners.

They will need to be capable of analyzing problems and new situations. Their generation will be required to develop well-considered innovative solutions for the many changing situations they will encounter. We don't know what "stuff" they'll need to know, but we do know they'll need to be smart, mentally agile, and creative.

But wait! If a content-based curriculum is inadequate, what happens to math, science, language arts, history—all the courses and subjects that we associate with a good education? Should we replace them with a "critical thinking class" or a "creativity class"? I think not. I believe it would be throwing the baby out with the bathwater. We would lose excellent educational practices developed over centuries, even as we refresh our educational vision.

Rather than jettisoning traditional school subjects, I suggest we reconceive their role. We should value them, not as a means to convey certain information, but as vehicles for developing specific ways of thinking, for honing cognitive abilities, and for nurturing habits of mind. Instead of math or science or language or music being a matter of "stuff" deposited in the minds of our children, we can appreciate these classes as "disciplines," as ways of training our minds towards particular ends. Since we don't know what specific information our children will need, our best recourse is to teach them what we do know in ways that sharpen their minds for the future. Indeed, this is exactly what academic disciplines were originally all about.

The Scientific Revolution (1550–1700) was primarily a revolution in thinking, not in information. The discipline of science involves asking authentic questions, developing hypotheses, designing and conducting experiments, and reaching provisional conclusions that lead to more questions. The scientific method imbues students with curiosity and confidence and gives them practice in analyzing dilemmas they are sure to encounter as they grow. Looking up known facts, even under the glorified name of "research," is not science.

Mathematics involves representing quantities and processes in symbols that can be manipulated in efficient, logical ways. Therefore, it is critical that students appreciate the relationship between symbols and the processes they represent.

Similarly, language arts must engage students in thinking like real writers. Teachers can activate their students' imaginations and encourage ideas to flow. Thereafter, students can learn to organize ideas in ways that allow them to communicate their thoughts to a reader. This discipline includes teaching children grammar in a functional way, where commas, periods, and quotation marks are not seen as "conventions" but as tools for making expressions clear.

In social science and history classes, students should examine primary sources and discover how historical knowledge is constructed. When they approach their study as "historians" and "archeologists," they learn to ask critical questions, link their ideas to other knowledge, and ground their conjectures with evidence.

The arts—visual art, dance, music, drama—are key disciplines that train students in flexible and creative ways of thinking. As research continues to show, when we practise an art, we strengthen our mind's executive function, which is the ability to self-regulate and stay focused on a task.[2] Whether students are working with modelling clay or their own bodies and voices, the arts facilitate how students experience the physical materials of existence. Indeed, the arts offer us ways to express thoughts, feelings, and ideas that might otherwise remain buried. Innovation depends largely on the arts.

The Judaic "subjects" must also be understood as "disciplines" and ways of thinking, and not only as "Jewish content" that we can use to teach children how to be "good Jews" or how to perform at *b'nei mitzvah* ceremonies. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote that Judaism is not just a way of living but also a way of thinking; and that the *mitzvot* are not done for one particular reason, they are "sources of emergent meaning."[3]

If there is one essential Jewish way of thinking, it is the ability to look at a text or at a situation from many points of view, to look beyond the obvious, to interpret, and to seek and find deeper meaning. Knowledge of the Hebrew language is the gateway to any Jewish learning that takes us beyond the superficial.

Jewish disciplines, such as Chumash and Talmud, engender excellent memory skills and cognitive training. The intellectual skill achieved by Jewish scholars is inherent in textual analysis as well as in decoding strands of an argument, distinguishing competing commentaries, and correlating sources. It is no accident that in the 19th and early 20th centuries, Jewish students who were deeply trained in Torah and Talmud took so easily to the study of law, medicine, and science.

As we move through the 21st century, we see that "ways of thinking" or "habits of heart and mind" are becoming the central goals of education. Some of these "ways of thinking" are best nurtured through the traditional disciplines: thinking like a scientist, like a mathematician, like a historian, like a writer, and so on. Other "habits of heart and mind" are nurtured through the cognitively rigorous and ethically essential Jewish ways of thinking and being.

We want our children to discern what is happening in the world around them. We hope they seek to meet the challenge of rapid societal change with their hearts and minds wide open. Academic disciplines—both universal and Jewish—offer the most reliable framework for this important pursuit.

1 See Ken Robinson, "Changing Education Paradigms," retrieved March 12, 2012, from http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_changing_education_paradigms.html

2 For examples of this research, see the Dana Foundation website which has links to numerous peer-reviewed articles. http://www.dana.org/artseducation.aspx

3 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1996).

Adapted from an article originally published in *Think*, Issue 11, Spring 2012.

Greg Beiles is Head of The Toronto Heschel School.

Integration occurs on four levels: Jewish with general studies, interdisciplinary study, learning through the arts, and a special kind of teacher.

The Power of Integrated Learning

BY DR. DAN GOLDBERG

It is said that the best way to learn something is to teach it. Integration is one of the pillars of a Toronto Heschel School education. Having taught in settings where integration was not emphasized, my early encounters with the Heschel approach felt a bit like that moment in the movie *The Wizard of Oz* when the monochromatic sepia tones suddenly shift into vivid technicolour. With integration as an organizing principle, lessons came alive in new and often unexpected ways. Witnessing firsthand the creativity and enthusiasm with which Heschel students approached learning was both moving and inspiring. Now in my fourth year as a teacher at Heschel, I appreciate this opportunity to share what I have learned about integrated education.

Within the field of education, integration takes many forms and is understood in a variety of ways. At Heschel, there are three well-established forms of integration that guide the faculty and that shape the experiences of our students: the integration of Jewish and general studies, the integration of the arts, and interdisciplinary integration. I have also identified a fourth form of integration, which I call process integration.

Years ago, in Los Angeles, I had a professor who had decided to speak only Hebrew to his children. Their mother and everyone else in their lives spoke English. When I asked the four-year-old daughter what language her father spoke to her, she answered, "Hebrew." When I asked her what language her mother spoke, she responded, "Normal."

Heschel was the first school in Toronto to emphasize the integration of Jewish and general studies. Where most Jewish day schools have separate Jewish and general studies departments, many Heschel teachers teach on "both sides of the curriculum." In addition, in each grade, central curricular themes span multiple Jewish and general subjects. For example, in Grade 5, the theme "From Slavery to Freedom" is echoed throughout the curriculum. In Bible studies, the students study the Exodus from Egypt. In language arts, they read *Underground to Canada* by Barbara Smucker and explore the journey of young American slaves escaping to Canada via the Underground Railroad.

At Heschel, our integration of Jewish and general studies and faculty sends the message that Judaism has relevance and meaning in our everyday lives. Jewish values and practices are more than a supplement that adds spice to our lives; they guide the way we live and shape who we are as human beings.

Integration of the arts is central to a Heschel education. A hallmark of arts integration at Heschel is the Artist Statement in which students explore their artistic objectives and choices and express them in a carefully developed written statement. The journey our students make between art and other disciplines is often a roundtrip or even offers multiple destinations.

With the Grade 7 novel study, the journey begins and ends with written language. Artistic expression is the middle step and enables the students to dig deep into the text itself and to explore how the text is affecting them. Reading *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton is a profound experience for a Grade 7 student. The characters are intensely real and, for some students, reading this novel represents the first time they have ever fallen in love with a book.

The final project calls upon the students to translate their feelings and insights about their favourite character into words, images, and symbols on a "Graffiti Wall," a canvas board 45 by 60 centimetres in size. The rich content of the Graffiti Wall is then explained in an accompanying Artist Statement. This back-and-forth journey between written words and visual art, between the intellect and levels of experience that precede and transcend rational thought, enables the students to enter the world of the novel in a life-altering way, and it allows the messages and lessons of the novel to take root deep within their consciousness.

At The Toronto Heschel School our emphasis on interdisciplinary integration is based on the understanding that the subjects we teach are artificial constructs that do not reflect the interrelated nature of reality. The "big ideas" and "essential questions" upon which curriculum is built are rarely limited to a single subject. For example, the theme "From Slavery to Freedom" mentioned above is echoed throughout the Grade 5 curriculum. In social studies and civics, the students explore the rights and responsibilities that come with living in a free society. By linking one subject to another and by reinforcing learning in multiple classes, interdisciplinary integration maximizes both efficiency and relevance.

Relevance is a key ingredient to success in any educational setting and it is an essential component of effective integration. Integrated education is not only about finding overarching themes and matching content across different disciplines. Integration is about offering a web of interrelated experiences that support and reinforce a child's efforts as a growing human being to master essential developmental tasks. True integration goes beyond what we as educators write on a curriculum document. It is what takes place within the consciousness of our students.

The idea of relevance leads me to the fourth form of integration, one that I call process integration as it encompasses the whole of the child's experience at school. The concepts we teach must be integrated into the process through which they are taught, modelled in the way teachers relate to students, and encouraged in the relationships that students have with one another. Process integration means that the values we teach permeate the life and culture of the classroom and, ultimately, the school.

In Grade 5, *Underground to Canada*, the Book of Exodus, and the overarching theme "From Slavery to Freedom" are rooted in the emphasis Jewish tradition places on human dignity and our obligation as Jews to use our capacity for empathy as a guide in our treatment of other human beings. These values can only take root in a classroom where the teacher goes out of his/her way to respect the dignity and feelings of his/her students.

At the heart of process integration are authenticity and an integrity that integrates the values one teaches. At the same time, as important as these values are, authenticity and integrity represent demanding standards that teachers are not always able to meet. At one point or another, even the most caring teachers let their students down in some way—by inadvertently teaching a boring lesson, by responding with impatience, or by failing to keep a promise. Teachers are human, and the job of teaching is too complex and challenging for anyone to do it perfectly.

All teachers make mistakes, and I know of only one antidote—the one taught by Jewish tradition: *Teshuvah* (i.e., making amends). Although *Teshuvah* is generally associated with Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, it is a practice that has year-round relevance because mistakes are made in all seasons. *Teshuvah* is a three-step process: acknowledging that one has made a mistake, apologizing and doing one's best to repair the damage, and taking care not to make the same mistake again.

Process integration represents every teacher's biggest and most important challenge. It involves putting aside our role and authority as teachers and standing before our students as fellow human beings who are worth no more and no less than they are. When a teacher performs *Teshuvah*, offering a student or a class a sincere and heartfelt apology, everything that teacher teaches is afforded a special kind of relevance in the minds and hearts of his/her students. As a result, integration occurs on a deep level.

In nearly four years at The Toronto Heschel School, I have already collected what feels like a lifetime of meaningful memories. One particularly poignant memory relates to the end of my first year. There are no bells at Heschel, so on the last day, in the final minute, students watched the clock and counted down as the hands came together to signify noon. "Three—Two—One—Zero!" Suddenly, there was an eruption of hugs and tears.

I was moved and also shocked. Looking back to my own childhood, I recall feeling nothing but unbridled elation and relief at the end of every school year. Of course, students at Heschel look forward to summer vacation. At the same time, their connection with the school and with one another goes very deep—deep enough that even a temporary separation packs an emotional punch.

I am convinced that the connection Heschel students feel with the school, with their teachers, and with their classmates is, in no small part, due to a philosophy of education that permeates the school. This philosophy not only recognizes but also embraces the wholeness and sacredness of each child and views him/her as an essential part of an interrelated and integrated world where school, family, community, Judaism, art, nature, God, and humanity interact. At The Toronto Heschel School, the locus of integration is deeper than any overarching theme, deeper than the curriculum itself. The ultimate integrating factor is the journey that we as teachers and students take together. It is a journey that encompasses the whole of our shared humanity.

This article was originally published in *Think*, Issue 11, Spring 2012.

Dr. Dan Goldberg wrote this article as a teacher at The Toronto Heschel School. He is now Head of School at The Paul Penna Downtown Jewish Day School in Toronto.

A very particular and intentional kind of classroom teaches children how to live with others, how to respectfully interact with those who are similar to them and with those who are different.

Classroom Community

HOW A CLASSROOM OF CHILDREN WITH THEIR TEACHER BECOMES A TRUE LEARNING COMMUNITY

BY HEIDI FRIEDMAN

The Toronto Heschel School creates a supportive school community based on integrity and respect. It starts in the classroom.

The classroom community models our society. It is a very particular and intentional kind of classroom that teaches children how to live with others, respectfully interacting with those who are similar to them and those who are different.

In a community-oriented classroom, when a dilemma arises, the issue becomes a teachable moment—a learning opportunity not to be missed. The teacher initiates a dialogue, not a monologue. She is a mirror for the children and she models how to express frustrations, how to communicate in a respectful manner, and how to remember each other's feelings. The children are full contributors to the conversation, and the teacher manifests genuine desire to join with them in discussing their shared community life.

In a community-oriented classroom, a teacher strives for authentic and meaningful interactions. The teacher carefully observes the children in her class and uses her observations of their habits to engage in purposeful conversations with each. The children receive the strong message that their thoughts, interests, successes, and struggles are both seen and valued, and the ongoing dialogue between student and teacher becomes a springboard to deepening the learning experience.

Shared experiences are valuable building tools for community. For example, when a student accidentally spills a bottle of water and everyone giggles, the children 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. The class can work together to write and illustrate a story about all of their spills. Their "book" can then enter the class library to be read and reread by the community members. A mundane occurrence becomes a powerful teaching and community-building opportunity.

Another strong communication comes through the classroom set-up. Our teachers think carefully about community culture and what message their set-up will send. Intentionally, our classroom carpets are circular—they become a sacred space where classroom community members can gather. The circle symbolizes wholeness; seated around it, everyone is equal and visible.

The community message is enhanced by what is displayed on the walls. Children spend approximately seven hours a day in their classroom, and an intentional teacher is acutely aware that what is on the walls seeps into their psyche. When she posts photos on the walls of children working cooperatively, helping and listening to one another, laughing together, or engaging in a communal project, the content of these photos communicates to the children that these behaviours are valued.

In a Toronto Heschel classroom children feel co-ownership of their space. They bring books and display items to class, create signs, and post lists. For example, during a community meeting about the corner used for playing with blocks, a child may suggest creating a "Block Corner" rotation list. When the teacher takes this seriously, asks the child to make the list, and then posts it in the Block Corner, she confirms the classroom as a collaborative space.

The teacher thinks carefully about routines. The snack routine illustrates this well. It is easy to take for granted that young children do well with a snack to sustain their energy. In an intentional classroom where community relationships are a priority, the teacher plans how to conduct the snack routine. How will the children and teacher sit? What will they discuss? Every one might sit on the carpet in a circle. The teacher might encourage relaxed conversation and use the time to model how group conversation transpires. Snack time becomes an opportunity to teach how we gather together and eat, how we engage casually in conversation and share our interests and lives informally. The cumulative effect of this simple interaction helps nurture the classroom community.

Other routines include the daily Morning Meeting, a special half-hour when the class gathers in the circle and shares moments in their lives outside of school: stories of new babies, a stolen car, a hockey game the night before. They learn to listen to one another, to probe, to ask questions, and to respond with interest.

The Morning Meeting also gives teachers a chance to describe the day's schedule, so there are no surprises. Children like safety and certainty. The teacher's management of daily routines and transitions confirms how the children are being taken care of at school. In our Morning Meeting we include *tefillah* (prayers) and our day begins predictably as we talk, listen, share, and pray together. It sets a good tone for the day.

A classroom culture is built layer upon layer. Community is rooted in the presence of each member, and questions arise when any are absent. Making a group call on speakerphone or sending cards or letters tells a missing member that his/her absence is felt and that the community cares.

A functional classroom community is foundational to all learning experiences. When children feel connected to others, when they feel comfortable and safe to be themselves, when they ask questions and take risks, their potential to learn and grow academically, socially, and emotionally is heightened.

Adapted from an article originally published in *Think*, Issue 10, Fall 2011.

Heidi Friedman is the Director of Early Years and Child Study at The Toronto Heschel School.

The hidden gem of the Strengths and Struggles Program is that it introduces children to the possibility that success lies within their reach. The program makes social and emotional learning a collective mission.

Strengths and Struggles

SELF-IMPROVEMENT IN SENIOR KINDERGARTEN

BY HEIDI FRIEDMAN AND TALYA METZ

To incorporate social and emotional learning into our classrooms, The Toronto Heschel School developed the Strengths and Struggles Program, which is now an integral component of the senior kindergarten curriculum.

The Strengths and Struggles Program encompasses the five skill sets of emotional intelligence:

Self-Awareness: Identifying one's thoughts, feelings, strengths, and limitations.
Social Awareness: Identifying and understanding others' thoughts and feelings; developing empathy.
Self-Management: Handling emotions; setting goals; dealing with obstacles.
Responsible Decision-Making: Generating, implementing, and evaluating positive, informed solutions to problems.
Relationship Skills: Avoiding negative peer pressure and working to resolve conflicts.[1]

The program is based on two kinds of self-reflection in two directions. Children first contemplate their personal strengths and struggles and look to understand their own behaviour. (What are you good at now and what are you working to improve?)

Then they consider social interactions and look to see how the classroom community fares as a whole. (Do we all tidy up? Do we listen attentively when our friends are speaking?)

Preparation for the Strengths and Struggles Program begins as the school year starts. The teacher establishes a class environment that makes the room an emotionally safe place to work and play, a haven where children and teachers feel comfortable to share thoughts and feelings with each other and the group. The teacher discerns and records patterns in each child's behaviour. For example, Jerry has trouble sharing toys and this creates conflict in his social interactions. From time to time as the year gets underway, the teacher and Jerry chat about this and during one conversation Jerry acknowledges that he just prefers to build on his own using all the toys at hand. Jerry has identified his struggle with sharing.

The Strengths and Struggles Program is ready to launch once the teacher has collected enough information and the class has had time to experience itself as a community. The teacher introduces the program as a forum for self-reflection and self-improvement. The goal is to work together to turn individual struggles into personal strengths.

Sitting in a circle, the children and teacher each share a strength and/or struggle, which is then noted onto a card and placed in the Strengths and Struggles Book (or kept private if preferred). The Strengths and Struggles Book charts each student's progress. Each student's card is moveable, and, as a struggle becomes a strength, the card is repositioned in the book to show the achievement. The children find it highly motivational to watch their struggles becoming strengths. They feel proud and excited that they will have yet another opportunity for further self-reflection and self-improvement when the process is repeated.

The children are offered specific strategies to help turn their struggles into strengths. Jerry learns techniques to develop sharing skills. A classmate whose strength is sharing toys might be called on to support Jerry's struggle. One child's personal struggle is addressed but two children practise social awareness, relationship, and empathy. The children are learning to work openly and confidently in a group.

Understanding social dynamics this early and this thoughtfully is an invaluable foundation; their classroom community is a microcosm of society. Together they identify their class' challenges and achievements and note them on cards in the Strengths and Struggles Book. They are very happy to watch their collective accomplishments develop.

The hidden gem of the Strengths and Struggles Program is that it introduces children to the possibility that success lies within their reach. Even at the young age of five, they come to appreciate the role that emotions play in their capacity to transform struggles into strengths. Linda Lantieri writes: "When social and emotional skills are taught and mastered, they help children succeed not just in school, but in all avenues of life. Social and emotional learning is like an insurance policy for a healthy, positive, successful life."[2]

In senior kindergarten at The Toronto Heschel School, the dream is that each student passing through our doors becomes equipped with the inner strength and resilience to approach the challenges of life.

1 Adapted from L. Lantieri, *Building Emotional Intelligence* (Boulder: Sounds True, 2008), p. 18.
2 Ibid., p. 19.

Adapted from an article originally published in *Think*, Issue 14, Fall 2013.
Heidi Friedman and Talya Metz teach at The Toronto Heschel School. Heidi Friedman is also the Director of Early Years and Child Study.

The young minds absorb that in our world water is not distributed equally; they see that our treatment of Canadian rivers can affect the lives of fish and animals far away. It becomes apparent that we belong to a world greater than our classroom, and greater than The Toronto Heschel School. It becomes clear that what we do in this world matters.

You Had Me at Hello

CHILDREN THRIVE WHEN THEY FEEL THAT THEY BELONG

BY ANDREA SCHAFFER

It's 8:30 a.m. A quiet buzz comes from the Grade 2 classroom as students enter. On the easel that stands by the door there is a morning message. They contribute their opinions to the question posed in the message and then cooperatively begin their morning work. We wait for our entire community to arrive before we settle down to begin the day with a brief morning meeting and *tefillah* (prayers).

By 8:40 we are sitting side-by-side in our circle, greeting one another in the language chosen for the day. This particular month that I am writing, our salutations vary from the Hebrew "Boker tov," to the Thai "Saudikop," to the Hindu "Namaste." They switch about because this month we are learning about stories and children from around the world.

Students have learned very quickly to respect this morning routine, and they always sit quietly awaiting their turn to be greeted by a friend. Students who arrive late eagerly find a spot in the circle, not wanting to miss the greeting that welcomes him/her into the community.

Intentionally, I do not greet the class as a whole but rather one by one. By this simple act, students learn that the Grade 2 community is one to which they each belong. Each child is welcomed by name as a separate and individual person; this confirms to each class member that his/her personal presence here is noticed and appreciated, that each belongs in this classroom and this community.

Author Mary Beth Hewitt writes, "Belonging is a key component to a healthy life. When people feel like they belong, they care about what those around them think of them. There is reciprocity to belonging: If you care, I care—if you don't care, I don't care."[1]

Children benefit greatly from feeling a sense of belonging in the classroom. When students' opinions and ideas matter and are heard, they will be more likely to participate, explain their thoughts, make mistakes, and take greater risks in their learning. For just these reasons, as a teacher, I work to instill a sense of belonging within the hearts and minds of all my students.

If students are having difficulty with any aspect of their learning, we set up individualized student conferences for them. This tells the whole class that we each have our strengths and struggles and often need different lessons or additional time to work on different skills so that we can succeed.

When a child feels this sense of belonging, he or she feels valued. When a child feels valued, that child will thrive.

Our students are also members of communities that go beyond their Grade 2 class. We cultivate their sense of belonging to the world outside of our classroom walls and even outside of our cosy Heschel School community. Yes, we take the lesson to the next level. In doing so, we take pains to explicitly teach our students the abstract but very true notion that they are part of the greater Jewish community of Toronto, the greater Canadian community, and and even the greater global communities.

We do this through teaching our students how water travels through the water cycle—in a true Toronto Heschel integrated way. As the school year begins, we introduce our Grade 2 students to the understanding that everything in the physical world is interconnected. We study and see how bodies of water connect to one another, one river to another river, a river to an ocean, and more rivers to more oceans. We also learn that the air we breathe might evaporate and later condense to become the rain that falls into our gardens. Some water that evaporates over Africa might just rain down over Canada.

The young minds of our students absorb that in our world water is not distributed equally; they see that our treatment of Canadian rivers can affect the lives of fish and animals far away. It becomes apparent that we belong to a world greater than our classroom, and greater than The Toronto Heschel School. It becomes clear that what we do in this world matters.

We also study the interconnectedness of people and how we belong to a Jewish community that has a presence on most of the continents around the earth. As Passover approaches, the students begin a new integrated unit. We explore the various Passover customs that are practised by Jews in different countries. We notice that, within all those different Jewish practices, we can find shared traditions that are common to Jews across the globe: we all celebrate freedom from slavery in ancient Egypt and we eat unleavened bread.

This past year we shared our feelings about Passover in a video that we sent to the Hadassah School of the Abayadaya Jewish community in Uganda. In order to make this video, we began by trading stories with each other about the meaning of Passover in our lives. Through this project, our seven year-olds saw how they belong to a community that is diverse and similar, far and near, all at the same time. Our Heschel students later shared more stories about their lives with the Grade 2 children at the Hadassah School.

This integrated unit teaches students about the lives of children from many countries through stories about these children's lives, hopes, and dreams. Our students begin to grapple with their developing perception of where and how they fit into this large world. They begin to sense a familiarity with people from different cultures and backgrounds, noticing that we have much in common with children in different countries, from the white bones beneath our skin to the soccer balls at recess.

In Torah class, our children read that the first human being, Ha'adam, was lonely, and so God divided Ha'adam into two halves. When the one half, a man, saw the other half, a woman, he declared, "This, at last, is bone of my bones" (Genesis 2:23). Even though the two halves weren't the same—one was a man and the other was a woman—deep down, at the level of the bones, they recognized that they belonged to one another. We teach our young Heschel students this same lesson; we teach them that, under our skins of different hues and colours, we are all made of the same sturdy bones. Our interests and talents may be similar or different from one another, but deep down, there are things that we share. We all need love, we all want friends, we all want to feel as if we belong. In my Grade 2 class, belonging begins by saying hello to every child, every day.

1 Mary Beth Hewitt, "Helping Students Feel They Belong," CYC-ONLINE, Issue 101, June 2007, p. 1. Retrieved 15 June 2015 from http://www.cyc-net.org/cyc-online/cycol-0706-hewitt.html

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Opportunities for socially valuable projects emerge as the children practise how to express an opinion without judgment and how not to put words in others' mouths. Through this process, mutual respect blossoms.

Beyond Social Media Activism

DEMOCRACY AND JUSTICE IN THE JUNIOR HIGH CLASSROOM

BY LESLEY COHEN

The summer of 2014 saw a social media phenomenon called the "Ice Bucket Challenge," which encouraged individuals to douse themselves with a bucket of ice water and post a video of the process online. The purpose was to raise awareness and funds for a neurodegenerative disease known as ALS. Hundreds of thousands of people accepted the challenge and donations to ALS organizations skyrocketed.

The Ice Bucket Challenge was a brilliant initiative that generated funds for a worthy cause. Nonetheless, critics soon popped up denouncing the challenge as digital "slacktivism." They called it armchair engagement in social justice that imparts little understanding of the cause at its heart.

I began to consider what the critics of slacktivism are battling, and I believe they are simply against jumping on bandwagons. They decry the lack of agency among participants of challenges, like the Ice Bucket, and point out that viral campaigns create followers instead of thinkers.

I began to wonder whether slacktivism might be at play in our schools. Do we plant the seeds of slacktivism when we ask youngsters to bring in a can of soup for the homeless when they never see its beneficiaries? Is slacktivism at work when junior high students sign petitions to support causes they don't fully understand?

My questions grew larger: Can we motivate youth to make meaningful decisions to support the welfare of others? How do children develop empathy and a sense of responsibility? How do we help them notice social needs based on their own moral sensibilities, and how do we inspire them to create innovative solutions? Can students cultivate a sense of social responsibility, not because they are tweaked externally by their screens and peers, but because deep inside they want to help?

In junior high civics at Toronto Heschel, we consciously nurture empathetic global citizens over a period of years. My students learn to notice their community's needs and to search for answers, just as the Ice Bucket Challenge founders did so well. We know that students' inspiration and innovation emerge from their own experiences, their natural sense of justice, and their morality. My job is to foment concern and motivation.

According to the celebrated psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, children's morality and sense of justice develop as they grow. As small children, their sense of right and wrong is entirely self-motivated; as young adults, they do what others think they should do. Ultimately they mature to recognize that a greater social good is worthwhile, despite one's own feelings or attachments.

Kohlberg found that children who are immersed in "democratic" educational environments—where they assume responsibility for decision-making and engage in shared, agreed-upon ethical practices—fare much better in their moral development than children who do not engage in these ways at school. The environments cannot be where children simply learn about democracy or justice; they must be where the children themselves participate meaningfully in democratic processes.[1]

Our junior high civics curriculum features a weekly class devoted to producing social justice results that the students generate themselves. We follow Kohlberg's rubric and begin "up close and personal" before moving outward. Each classroom project must resonate with each age group; the students must be able to empathize with the cause at hand and identify with the possibility for social action.

Year by year, our students engage in projects of broadening scope. Grade 5 students learn what responsible informed decision-making looks like and how democracy functions in their classroom, city, province, and country. The Grade 6 class creates an environmental project that benefits their school community, which for Heschel kids is a very familiar cause to champion. Grade 7 students branch into the local and even international Jewish community, while the Grade 8 initiative is grounded in universal identity. The graduating class' project encompasses the global community as students study human rights and pursue plans to protect them.

Our civics projects differ from the Ice Bucket Challenge because a sense of personal agency is embedded in each effort. As the children practise how to express an opinion without judgment and how not to put words in others' mouths, mutual respect blossoms and opportunities for exciting, socially valuable projects emerge. I have witnessed classes refrain from an important vote because one classmate is absent, and students work painstakingly to incorporate others' suggestions in their own proposals.

Our students deliberate and vote on the decisions that relate to their initiatives. They engage in the thoughtful planning that real-world problems demand and determine the content, pace, and direction of the work. They feel empowered. Year by year, our students come to understand what it means to be a catalyst and a leader. Annually, the junior high civics classes implement feasible projects that contribute authentically to the greater social good.

As students define the process and content of their own social justice experience, their commitment to the cause becomes deep and real. I see the growth of empathy in the depths of their understanding of why they are proposing certain projects and for whose benefit. Slacktivism is written out of the equation when the children's own voices and moral convictions matter.

Maybe slacktivism gets a bad name because it's so easy. It does not take much to click "Like" on Facebook or post a video to social media. However, I'm thinking that if we continue to teach students the social value and personal reward of active participation—in their peer groups, at school, or online—then perhaps, as they become citizens with full legal rights and responsibilities, deeper and concerted acts of social justice will become as second nature as clicking the "Like" button.

1. T.C. Hunt and M. Mullins, "Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development," *Moral Education in America's Schools: The Continuing Challenge* (New York: IAP, 2005), pp. 173–180.

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Lesley Cohen is a teacher at The Toronto Heschel School.

"…the teacher is the text that the pupils read; the text that they will never forget."
A.J. Heschel

Role Models, Please

EVERYTHING DEPENDS ON THE TEACHER

BY GAIL BAKER

Headlines and photos these days are too terrible for my eyes, let alone 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 gaining 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]

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 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, and 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.

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 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 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, it will make it last longer.

Good role models raise school standards. When teachers create positive and respectful relationships with their students, they institute high-functioning classrooms where students are ready to learn. When students trust and admire their teachers, they stretch themselves academically and they 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.drrobynsilverman.com/powerful-words/

3 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *I Asked for Wonder: A Spiritual Anthology of Abraham Joshua Heschel*, edited by Samuel H. Dresner (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983).

This article was originally published in *Think*, Issue 10, Fall 2011.

Gail Baker is a co-founder of The Toronto Heschel School and was the Head of School from 2001–2014.

It has become the centre of a community of people who are working together to mould our kids into thoughtful, responsible, well-rounded people.

My Sons Go to School and I Learn

A PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE

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 archeological 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.

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.

Coming into the school, I knew about its cutting-edge teaching methods, but 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 is beginning JK this 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.

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

Being connected to Toronto 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 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.

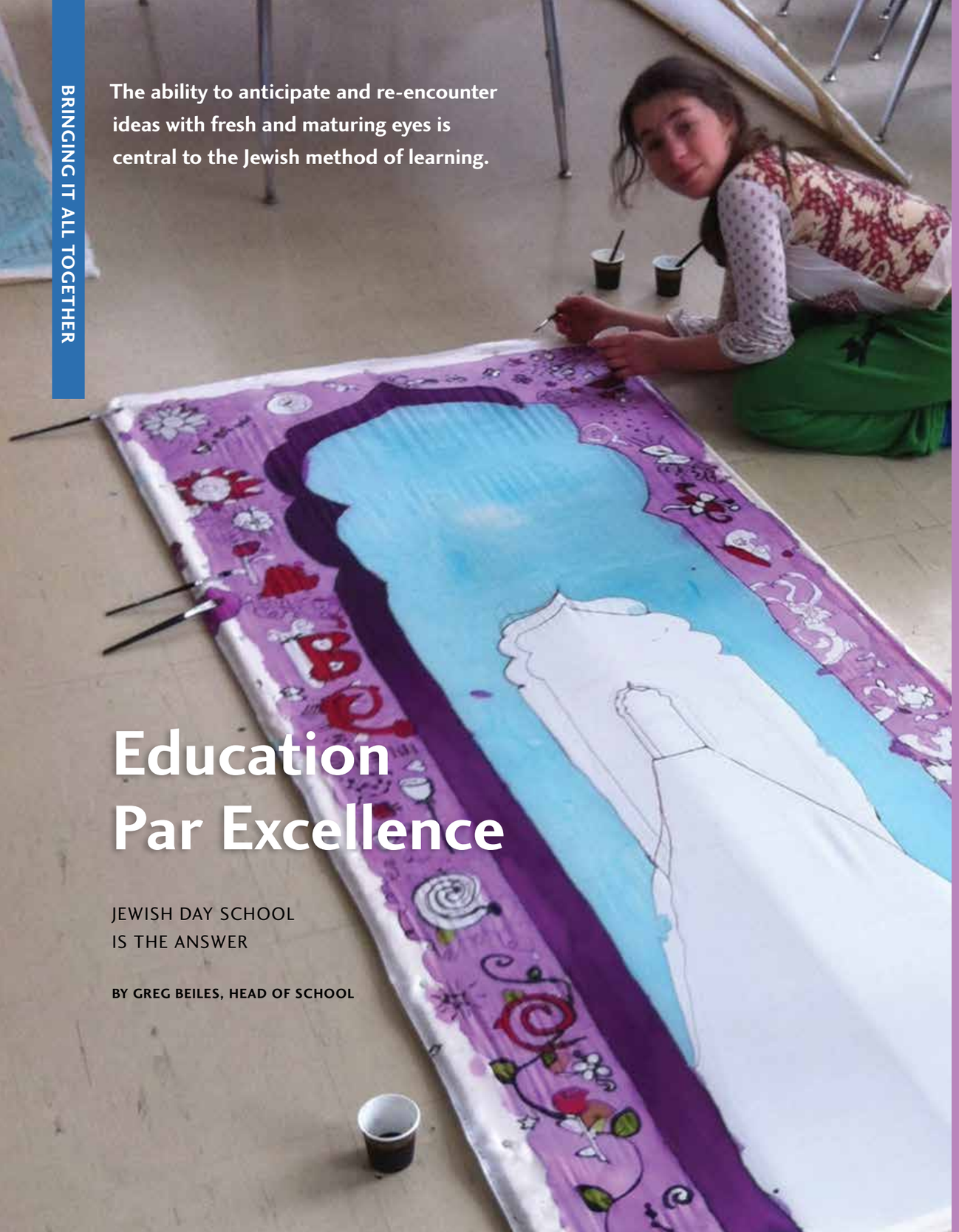
In two short years, many Heschel families have become our close friends. The school has physically brought us together—at drop-off and pick-up, at concerts and curriculum nights, and at dozens of other school-related events thoughout the year. But on a deeper level, we are drawn together by our similar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

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 mould 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.

This article was originally published in *Think*, Issue 7, Spring 2010.

Lisa Richler wrote this article in 2010 as the parent of two Toronto Heschel School students. She now has three children at the school. In 2013, Lisa joined the Admissions, Marketing, and Communications team at The Toronto Heschel School.



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

Education Par Excellence

JEWISH DAY SCHOOL IS THE ANSWER

BY GREG BEILES, HEAD OF SCHOOL

For some parents, enrolling their children in Jewish day school education is a clear choice. Family tradition, adherence to Judaism as a religion, and 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 just a way to get the advantages of private school education at a fraction of the cost.

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.

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, instills 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.

The children become accustomed to analyzing and understanding situations, problems, and people at more than one level. This is a life skill, not just a Jewish skill. 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.

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.

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