



## The Lola Stein Institute for Leadership in Education

### PAM STEIN CHAIR

The Lola Stein Institute concentrates on the content and delivery of the best education. It is a centre for teacher training, curriculum development and publication that began in association with The Toronto Heschel School and now offers its accumulated knowledge and educational leadership more broadly.

The Institute team knows inspired teachers need energizing opportunities, impassioned colleagues and wonderful materials. The Lola Stein Institute generates all three.

The Institute reaches teachers close to home and far afield. Its community agenda for 2008 includes the "Food for Thought" series of professional enhancement seminars open to the educational community at large and the sale of pedagogical materials for integrated Jewish education engaging the Arts across the disciplines.

Pam Stein is the chair of The Lola Stein Institute and founding board member of The Toronto Heschel School. Her eldest three children are alumni, the fourth now in grade 4. She has collaborated on the Toronto Heschel team since 1996.



Lola and Mannie Stein, 1995

**Lola Stein z"l** Lola Stein Z"L was grandmother to 4 students at The Toronto Heschel School and great-grandmother to a 5th as of September '08. She was one of the early female pharmacists in South Africa, probably the first Jewish one, but her very special talent was in hospitality and friendship. She cared for her friends and family, at home and across the globe, individually, uniquely and lovingly. When she passed away, one friend chose to honour her memory in a way that would also reach around the world. This was seed of sharing educational materials developed here in Toronto.



**The Lola Stein Institute**  
LEADERSHIP  
IN EDUCATION

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# Leadership in Education

ISSUE NO. 2 • JUNE 2008



THE LOLA STEIN INSTITUTE JOURNAL

## Self-Esteem Revisited

### Mission Control

GAIL BAKER DIRECTOR

During the 1970's when I was immersed in teacher training, the "self-esteem" movement was in vogue. We read voraciously on the subject and learned that praising children was the thing to do. When little Johnny coloured enthusiastically, we hugged him and cheered. When little Jenny leafed through a storybook, we gushed all over her.

Years past. Johnny and Jenny grew up to be difficult adolescents putting little effort into their schoolwork. What happened? I suggest that the "self-esteem" movement praised the wrong thing. The children grew up insecure, with a fragile sense of self linked to factors beyond their control. They were neither resilient nor peaceful.

By calling Jenny, "My little reader!" and Johnny, "My great artist!" we were building their self-doubt and not their self-esteem. Jenny's identity was invested in being an early reader. She saw it meant a lot to her teachers and parents. They told her she was extra-special to be reading so well. It got tricky when reading became more complicated. Jenny began struggling with comprehension and didn't know what to do. Her efforts did not receive the same praise and she had not been

taught to deal with difficulties and failures. Deep inside she was panicked by her new role. She was now a contender, not a champion. No one else seemed to mind she had lost her status as a winner. She turned off.

Everyone said Johnny was going to build beautiful buildings because he drew so well. He saw his teachers and parents were thrilled with his special talent. Later when Johnny was asked to develop his own ideas, he quickly put away the paints and pencils. He couldn't let anyone see that he didn't know what to do. He said he just didn't like drawing anymore. He would protect the secret that there really was no special talent. He shut down. It was over.



"children feel most successful when they see evidence of real progress"

Meanwhile for the children who were not immediate achievers, praise was working different damage. Jenny's little sister struggled with learning to read. Every time her teachers and parents told her she was fantastic, another piece of her self-esteem was chipped away. She could see that the adults in her life were not being truthful. This made her feel more insecure and very confused. Little sister's self-esteem was temporarily restored when she finally learned to read, but it was brittle and fell apart a short time later when she faced her next challenge.



Also little sister noticed that she received all kinds of "love and attention" whenever she was failing and frustrated. Once she mastered the skill the attention disappeared. She wondered if it was better to fail.



As parents and educators, there is much that we can do to build self-esteem in our children. We should acknowledge the effort and then help children plan "next steps". Our children need to understand what the finished product looks like, so they understand the expectations.

We observe that children feel most successful when they see evidence of real progress and when they are in learning situations that are authentic and meaningful. It is then that they feel pride and satisfaction. We are their collaborators, offering a safe place to meet challenge and fostering the patience, resolve and effort needed for mastery.

Gail Baker is the Co-Founder of The Toronto Heschel School. She is currently Chair of the Presidium of Principals of Jewish Day Schools of the UJA Federation of Greater Toronto. Gail nurtures a career long passion for reaching and teaching to the essential individuality in each child. This has grown to a parallel commitment encouraging and refining the unique talents of each teacher on her team and beyond.

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The Lola Stein Institute  
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IN EDUCATION

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## Editor's Desk

PAM STEIN CHAIR

I can't remember which of The Toronto Heschel School's co-founders first told me about the butterfly struggling free from the cocoon. Was it Gail Baker, Ellen Kessler, Judith Leitner, Baruch Rand, or Rachael Turkienicz? Each conjured the image at some time, the point being that if you touch a butterfly's wings while it struggles out from the cocoon, the effort stops and the process fails.

This second issue of The Lola Stein Institute Journal is directed at what learning means. As each submission arrived, the butterfly metaphor repeatedly came to mind. Gail writes how self-worth comes to a child through his or her own efforts. Greg explains that training in thinking skills brings important results. Ellen reminds us that mind, body and soul are nourished when we tend our garden. Judith describes crafting students' methods and routines as a microcosm, with the macro payoff being craftsmanship of a rich and meaningful life.

This issue looks at the activities and processes leading to the results parents want. With so many changes in society (internet access, global village thinking, multiplying choices) there is a parallel need for change in the method, process and content of education. The children must know how to learn and they must be equipped with skills required in today's world. In this issue our writers protect the butterflies, as they emerge on their own.

This past April in Boston Gail and Judith presented a workshop at the annual conference of The Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education (PEJE). Their topic was how learning through the arts fosters educational excellence.

Again they were congratulated as North American leaders in the field. The Boston based vanguard is now turning to look at educational process and content which has been our team's focus since 1996.



Our educators anticipate sharing their decade plus of learning with their peers across North America, providing advanced training in integrated study, thinking skills and learning through the arts. September will see the start of our monthly GTA workshop series, "Food for Thought," and the workshops may go on the road. We have the programmes that others are seeking.

The goal is to nurture a generation of thinking Jews. We want schools to transmit life skills and the ingredients for Jewish continuity. We want a generation prepared to participate in the Jewish community and in the big wide world. In his latest book, Five Minds for the Future, Howard Gardener explains how education today must differ from schooling past. Schools need to hone thinking skills in new ways. It is inspiring to see that the North American day school community is moving in this direction. Then all the butterflies will emerge strong and ready.

Errata: Drew Rothman and the Grade 8 class investigated the path of light discovering it does not bend.





# Learning Matters

## Awe and Wonder

GREG BEILES CURRICULUM AND TRAINING

The difference between learning and knowledge is an old debate that is highly relevant in this Internet age of accessible data and electronic answers.

An anecdote, attributed to Rabbi A.J. Heschel, quoting a well known Talmudic verse goes as follows:

*“When we come before the gates of heaven, we will not be asked whether we recall this or that fact. Rather we will be asked, “Did you appoint for yourself an hour of learning?”*

This anecdote illustrates that learning, rather than knowledge, is the purpose of education.

Learning is often associated with process and knowledge with product. This invites the query: “The process may have been great, but what about the product?” In the language of education, the question becomes: “The students may have learned, but do they know anything?”

The question sounds odd because it assumes that the whole point of learning is to know “stuff”. If you don't end up knowing “stuff”, what exactly was that learning all about? This “banking theory” of learning suggests the purpose of education is to internalize information to be “withdrawn” as needed.

Another approach, known as ‘Constructivism’, suggests that the purpose of learning is to develop, strengthen, and exercise the capacity to think. Constructivists,

including Jean Piaget and John Dewey, believe human beings construct knowledge by doing. This leads educators to be mindful to provide the right kind of educational experiences.

Arthur Costa describes this method through an analogy to kinesthetic training;

*“Human beings are born with the capacity and inclination to think. Nobody has to” teach us how to think” just as no one teaches us how to move or walk. Moving with precision and style, however, takes much time and coaching. A superb ballerina, tai chi master, or gymnast needs years of practice, concentration, reflection, and guidance to perform intricate manoeuvres...As with athletics, students need practice, reflection, and coaching to think well.”* (Educational Leadership, February 2008).



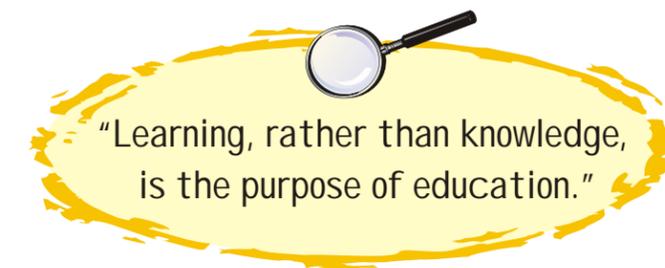
This does not mean that knowledge and content don't matter. It just reverses the order of things. Rather than learning being the mechanism by which we acquire knowledge, knowledge (the content we learn) should be seen as grist upon which we sharpen the mill of the mind. This ultimately means that the way we learn is just as, or even more important, than what we learn.

In disciplines ranging from Science to Hebrew to the Arts, there are many examples of practices showing how the way in which we learn has far reaching implications. One example, which gets at the heart of the issue, comes from the discipline of mathematics.

We want our children to master the multiplication tables by the end of grade three or four. One way to achieve this goal is rote memorization. The rote approach teaches multiplication tables as the internalization of visual symbols, something akin to the memorization of hieroglyphics. However, mathematics is a system of logical relations. To learn multiplication as a visual memory exercise does not train the brain for the logical reasoning inherent in mathematical thinking. Some specific knowledge may be acquired; but mathematical thinking is stifled.

Instead of memorizing, a student can investigate multiplication, division and fractions (they all go together) through a problem-solving approach that encourages thinking. We employ a variety of games, patterning activities, and problem-solving strategies to ensure the students are always thinking when learning to multiply and divide. For instance, we haven't abandoned flash cards; but the cards we use are designed to recall patterns or strategies, and not simply

to recall a particular numeral. Students learn their multiplication tables and the reciprocal division and fraction equations. Most importantly, because of how they learned, the students have improved their cognitive capacities for pattern recognition, strategic thinking, active memory, and making choices.



Let us now return to the question at the Gates of Heaven. One might say that thinking is well and good for heaven, but in this world, we need the facts to get by. The “knowledge economy” has become common. By the law of supply and demand, this suggests that those who have the knowledge will succeed over those who don't. But, is knowledge really in short supply?

Those of us who roam the Internet know that information is easy to come by. In reality, the skills we need are the ability to assess, organize, utilize, and think strategically about the information we find. Thinking really matters.

Recently in the *Globe and Mail*, I noticed the term “the ideas economy.” The notion of an “ideas economy” emphasizes thinking over knowledge. This subtle shift, from knowledge to ideas, from content to thinking, highlights why learning is more important than ever.

Greg Beiles is Curriculum Director of The Toronto Heschel School and has been at the school, first as a teacher, since 1997. Greg believes deeply that children are active builders of knowledge and empathy, and that a child's perspective is influenced more by the way in which learning is structured than by the specific content of the curriculum.



# How Does Our Garden Grow?

## Nurturing Nature in Our Children

ELLEN KESSLER ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES

Tactile, real-life opportunities assist children in understanding. Ecology, biology, meteorology, earth and environmental sciences and even measurement become real. We strive to make education tangible and gardening on school grounds is one such real-life opportunity. Gardening has been a major focus for environmental educators for decades but gardening at school has seen little innovation. Except here.

In the garden, our children practice responsibility, caring and wonderment. These skills are fundamental to leading meaningful lives and essential to preserving creation in all its beauty and awesome grandeur. The competencies blend; a garden, a life, a world.

School gardens have always been a vibrant part of our environmental ethos. Related activities make the gardens part of the formal classroom curriculum, allowing skills and ideas learned through gardening to bridge across academic disciplines.



Our gardens vividly illustrate our history. We were proud of the raised garden beds built for us by Isaac Mazer's grandfather, Jack Chisvin. The apple tree, donated to honour our first principal, Baruch Rand, moved with us to Faywood. The lovely peonies, planted by the children and grandchildren of Hy and Shirley Rabinovich, to celebrate their 60th anniversary, continue to bloom.

*"In the garden, our children practice responsibility, caring and wonderment."*

On Mitzvah Day 2006, families formed the large garden in the north east corner of our Faywood campus. Mitzvah Day 2007 added the raised bed shaped like a Magen David, now home to a fragrant variety of herbs and edible flowers. Grade ones explore this sensual space annually preparing spice (besameem) boxes to take home for Havdallah. We have shared this garden with outside groups in many positive ways.

The tiny garden displays the Eco Art bird feeders and baths built by our Environmental Club. The JK Extended Afternoon Programmes plant interesting spring bulbs here and grow a little summer cutting garden from seeds. The Sukkot Garden grows thanks to students who visit the garden during recess or after hours.



The Chalutzim Garden, named for Israel's pioneers, is an integrated project in Grade Three. The Chalutzim had to toil the earth, securing their place on it, to grow their own food. The learning goals of The Ontario Curriculum focus on understanding plant growth and healthy soils, and so our children assume responsibility for a private section of our large garden. They plant organic lettuces, learn about composting in "earth machines" and add soil amendments.

*"The gardens' ongoing vitality depends on volunteer families and staff."*

The children celebrate when they share their produce with the entire school on the second last day of term, serving the Heschel Organic Green Salad -- a much loved tradition. We have botany, environmentalism, history, the love of Israel, teamwork, hospitality, and personal gratification all from one garden!

At the far end of the large garden a special area is reserved from mowing. This is the butterfly garden, or native wildflower garden, where an array of wonderful plants is visited by birds and butterflies. Children of all ages carefully tiptoe on a stepping stone path through an eclectic and colourful garden where an intricate web of life takes place. This evokes wonder in all who visit.

School life transpires daily within our expansive, grassy, much enjoyed field. We live surrounded by nature. Carefully we map and measure the six hectares of green space year after year! We tend it. We clean it. We appreciate it.

The gardens' ongoing vitality depends on volunteer families and staff. Garden Guardians are families who sign up for one week's responsibility for tilling and tending throughout the summer. They hook up our simple irrigation system, weed, harvest or reseed. Try it. You'll love it!

Ellen Kessler is a Co-Founder of The Toronto Heschel School and leads its award-winning nature and ecological programme. Ellen is a math and science teacher who blends commitment to Jewish observance with her love of the natural world and for children.



# The Arts, Creativity and Respect

JUDITH LEITNER INTEGRATED ARTS

A child's creation of a painting, dance or story, in many ways, parallels the creation of a life to live. Authenticity and aesthetic sensitivity are core to a wonderful work of art and also lie at the heart of a meaningful life. Learning through the Arts advances skills in the art of living.



"The Arts leverage a student's ability to think critically and act creatively."

One of an educator's primary goals is to craft creative learning environments that foster self-respect, and positive self-image where students learn to recognize and trust their instincts and individual strengths. To create such learning environments we integrate the Visual Arts, Music, Dance, Drama and Storytelling into all learning. Days spent learning through artistic processes embed habits of respect in student routines. The Arts cut through differences in learning styles and culture. They are languages that children learn to speak and they bring an entire curriculum to life, turning abstractions into concrete reality.

When learning through the arts, children ask the same questions they pose in daily life. What do I see? What do I know now? What do I do now? If I do this, then what will happen to that? Why didn't I think of that before? Why

doesn't anyone else understand what I mean? How can I help them understand? What do I need to express this idea and complete my plan? Can we figure this out together?

## THE CLASSROOM

Our classroom is a richly textured learning environment, a shared work space, where students recognize and respect each others' learning styles and materials. Here discussions leading to the expression of ideas through music, visual arts, dance and storytelling allow students and teachers to practice the art of respectful communication as well as attentive listening. Collaborative, project-based learning (learning b'chevrutah) accommodates diverse thinking styles and leads students to appreciate each others' skills, artistry and hard work. *(Did they really decorate the walls of the Temple because people couldn't read? What did the decorations do?)*



## THE PERSON

The poet, playwright and painter e.e.cummings observed that: *"We do not believe in ourselves until someone reveals that deep inside us is a valuable individual, worth listening to, worthy of our trust, sacred to our touch. Once we believe in ourselves we can risk curiosity, wonder, spontaneous delight or any experience that reveals the human spirit."*

From the earliest ages students ponder their humanity. *(Who am I?)* Human dignity, Tzedek, reverence for our precious environment and our homes are themes and inquiries that are central to who we are. Through the arts we seek to understand our hopes, dreams and unanswered questions. When seen through a Jewish lens, they are central to our programme.

## THE GROUP

We encourage children to think and feel their way through themes and concepts. First through intellect and emotion and then through a variety of artistic channels, they express what they have learned. Students perform their understanding to crystallize their thoughts. This enriches the learning.

Rewriting the Biblical Books of Samuel, Shakespearean plays or the Haggadah into their own style, culture and era is one very clear example. Illustration of poems or historical themes is another. It's digestion.

Peer Sharing is fundamental to a culture of Derech Eretz, the ethical way. The practice of Peer Sharing advances critical listening, observing and reflecting.

Children guide and teach each other. Creative learning becomes visible and community life is made concrete. *(Do you think we still live as strangers in a strange land? Why do some people mind being with strangers, but others don't?)*

Sharing in a large group engages students to frame thoughtful questions and offer astute observations. In hallway exhibitions they explore alone or with classmates and take time to understand fellow artists' unique ways of thinking. *(Wow, look what she did! How did he make this?)*



The Arts leverage a student's ability to think critically and act creatively. They lead students to formulate and communicate profound thoughts and feelings. These are important life skills and they require practice.

Children become accustomed to reflect and interpret their thoughts as these thoughts are evoked daily by events and processes. With practice and gradual ease the children attain access to their own instincts and emotions. This self-awareness applies widely as time and experiences accrue.

Judith Leitner is a Co-founder of The Toronto Heschel School and Director of Integrated Arts. She is an artist and photographer. Judy finds that there is a naturalness to the arts that appeals to children and she continues to use the experience of artistic expression to advance multi-dimensional understanding.



# The New Teacher Academy

## Spring Update

GALLERY TOBIE FRANKLIN

One of the signature experiences in Columbia University's New Teacher Academy (NTA) is the "Mini-Grant." This experience leads participants through a process of identifying and solving situations, related to the curriculum, that are challenging them in the classroom. The ten Toronto Heschel School teachers in the NTA this year were Elissa Wolff, Nicole Boltiansky, Sigal Nissel, Jordana Mednick, Judy Benarroch, Ruth Elbaz, Shawn Stevens, Drew Rothman, Guy Paulin, and Marni Dishy. Each teacher was required to create and implement a mini-grant project to solve a particular situation for themselves.

Time was allocated during each NTA training session for the teachers to focus on different components of their proposals. Once teachers felt confident about their drafts, the drafts were submitted to Columbia University's Teachers College for acceptance or rejection.

Two teachers created math projects to address individual students' learning needs and styles. Both French teachers in the NTA explored a variety of French establishments and communities in Toronto to help

their students appreciate French as a living language. One kindergarten teacher helped her students become better storytellers by studying Robert Munsch's books and understanding him as a mentor. Becoming a better storyteller is important for early learners because it is the first step in writing a personal narrative.

I am pleased to report that all first drafts were accepted. All ten teachers received positive feedback plus the grant award of \$250 to use in their classrooms. The two teachers, who are completing the NTA for graduate level credit, received a passing grade for their mini-grant proposal. The awards applied throughout the school's grade levels in Judaic Studies, Social and Environmental Studies, Language Arts, Math, French, and Science.

On June 26th, with a representative from Columbia University flying in, the ten teacher participants will present their grant projects and personal professional portfolios to their NTA at a dinner reception and award ceremony. This concludes their full year of advanced professional training.



# A Nice Place To Go To School

GALLERY KIM SCHEWITZ

When we learned that writer and mother, Kim Schewitz, did an in depth analysis of schools in the GTA and decided on THS, where the Lola Stein programme is incubated and refined, we asked her why.

When asked to write about why I would like to send my children to The Toronto Heschel School, I thought about all the things I could write that impressed me.

I could write about the school's well defined and well articulated vision, philosophy and pedagogical mission.

I could write about the passion for learning and love of teaching that was evident when I spoke with the teachers.

I could write about the educational wisdom in valuing multiple intelligences and teaching through all five senses.

I could write about the school's accreditation as an eco-school and how environmental consciousness and protection form a central pillar in the school's programme, not because "saving the environment" is a "hot" topic, but because, as Jews, we are responsible to appreciate God's world and to take care of it.



I could say I was impressed by the school's commitment to ongoing teacher development (including a partnership with Columbia University) and the fact that continued investment in teachers can only make them more motivated and inspired to pass their learning on to the children they teach.

I could tell you how Jewish values and ethics are woven into the curriculum inextricably, illuminating the many facets of Judaism and revealing what it means to be a Jew, how the Judaic studies are dynamic and not just rote learning of Jewish rules and history.

I could speak about the school's mission to teach through awe and wonder, how this awakens the child's inquisitiveness and renders learning inspirational and lasting.

But mostly I would like to write about the simple fact that The Toronto Heschel School seems like a nice place to go to school; a safe place; a nurturing place; a place to get to know oneself; a place where self esteem is a thing of beauty, precious and sacred, something to be felt, held, grown and protected. And to me that speaks volumes.



Kim Schewitz is a writer who conducted exhaustive research before deciding where to send her son to school. Her child is coming to The Toronto Heschel School in 2008.



# Keeping a Watchful Eye, Captain Underpants to Captain Nemo

GALLERY TOBIE FRANKLIN

Students often wonder if I possess ESP (extrasensory perception). How else could I know what video and computer games they play, what television shows they watch or what books they read outside of school? The answer is simple. A student's writing mirrors the language and content of his or her viewing and reading habits.



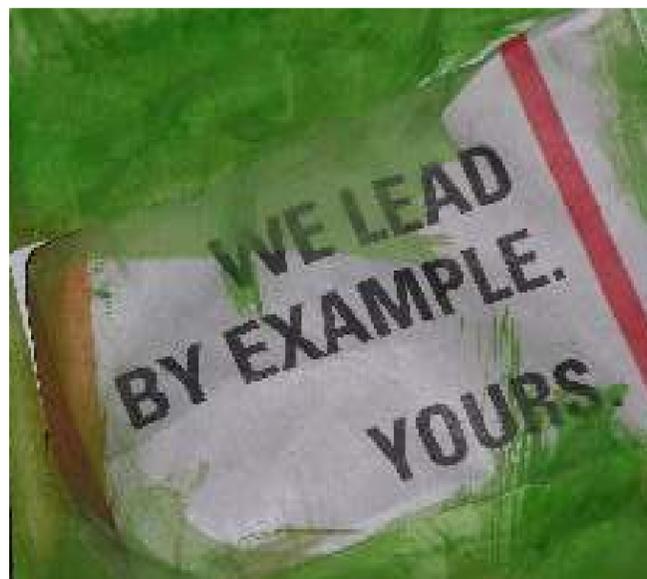
"we teach our students that authors are teachers too."

To be able to make recommendations I stay up-to-date and review as many books as possible. Stories written by very different nine or ten-year-olds might look oddly similar to The Day My Butt Went Psycho or Zombie Butts from Uranus, both by Andy Griffiths. As a parent, would you not prefer their stories to more closely resemble the writing of Louis Sachar or another award-winning children's author?

Research suggests that to maintain grade-level progress, by third grade, a child needs to read for two hours a day. Quantity matters. The 2 hours do not include talking about reading, doing exercises or assignments related to reading or listening to a teacher or parent read.

The next question refers to quality. If you want your child to enjoy reading, does it have to be quality text for there to be any educational benefit? Certainly there are times when adults read a beach or airplane book or grab a magazine in the supermarket. Isn't there any value in reading cartoons?

As early as kindergarten at The Toronto Heschel School, we teach our students that authors are teachers too. In grades one and two, we spend four to six weeks studying an author as a mentor. We orientate the children to learn to write by apprenticing themselves to authors we admire. In grade one, we invite students to notice things Ezra Jack Keats does as a writer, to think through the effect of his techniques, and to consider using the same practices in their own writing.



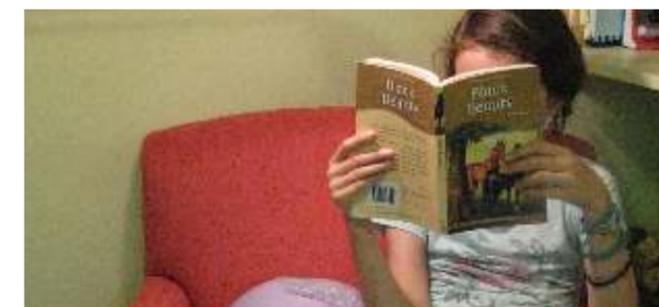
If parents reinforce this at home, children will likely acquire more selective reading tastes, i.e. choose better books. A parent might ask, "What part do you like in this book?" or even "What do you like on this page?" and "How come?". Parents could ask, "Did you notice what Robert Munsch does in this story?" or "Maybe you too can write a surprise beginning like Louis Sachar in "Maniac Magee"? or "Can you stretch a small moment like Ezra Jack Keats did in "The Snowy Day."



"Their heads will fill with interesting notions."

Parents need to encourage reading and to keep an eye on what is being read. If we see the authors or journalists as teachers standing before our child's reading eyes, it helps us assess appropriate content. Do we want our child's head filled with that? If our child passes the time taking in unimportant material, is there still time available to read and absorb good material? Are reading opportunities being lost? The local library, the Internet, and the classroom teacher can all help parents navigate the realm of children's literature.

Often we are concerned about struggling or reluctant readers who shy away from books. Magazines can provide interesting bite-sized reading materials for every age and for every interest, but they too should be selected with consideration. Some good magazines are: Chirp (ages 3 to 6), Chickadee (ages 6 to 9), Owl (preteens), Time for Kids, with three junior versions available at [www.timeforkids.com](http://www.timeforkids.com), is all about current events, Sports Illustrated for Kids (ages 8 to 15).



Some books are tricky to assess. For instance, the entire Captain Underpants series does get reluctant and struggling readers to read. Although it contains what some adults call "bathroom" humour and its comic book sections contain many spelling errors, it is surprisingly in good taste, and there is no gratuitous violence. The author, Dav Pilkey, introduces students to the figure of speech called double entendre which is a phrase that is open to two different meanings, one usually humorous and risqué.

The series is a favourite among students, especially boys, in grades two and three, partly because it is interactive and partly because it is irreverent. The series is known to propel students stuck in easier chapter books onto more challenging reads such as, the Marvin Redpost series by Louis Sachar.

Teachers, of course, would like students to eventually dive into a book with a complex character like the mysterious Captain Nemo in Jules Verne's Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea. Until then, with a watchful eye, continue encouraging your children to read literature that engages them and does not offend. Their heads will fill with interesting notions and hopefully, they will even notice techniques to emulate in their own writing.

Tobie Franklin, head of Child Study at The Toronto Heschel School has pursued graduate level study in educational psychology. Through ongoing professional development, she continues to find new ways to set children up for success.



## Sudoku Levene... as if (Part 2)

GALLERY FICTION MARLEE PINSKER

This story is the second part of a continuing story. Read on to enjoy a sweet and agonizing soap opera and float through one family's saga.

My clock said 4:30 when I sat up in bed, as awake as I would ever be. "Sudoku?" I called out. I could imagine my daughter's name echoing in her room, hitting the wall of mirrored closet doors and ricocheting off the shiny mural on the ceiling.

"Sudoku?" No answer. If she wouldn't speak to me during the day, I surely couldn't expect her to come running when I called her at 4:30 a.m., rushing into my room as though she were the mommy and I was the suffering child.

In the darkness I walked across my room, pressed my hand against my door so that it silently slid away into its recess and walked up the stairs to my daughter's room.

Sudoku's red hair was a shapeless swirl around her head, and her mouth was open against the pillow. She looked younger than eleven now, and I suddenly thought of her fragile little hairless head when she was an infant. I sat down, afraid to wake her. In my mind I whispered to her, "SPEAK TO ME! Just let me know you're o.k., baby..." I thought. "Find a way to tell me what's wrong..."

As usual there was no response. If she didn't reply to my words, was I thinking she would answer my thoughts? I went back to my room and spent the next three hours tossing and turning.

I struggled to get myself upright and lurched to my bathroom. Halfway there the alarm went off. I jumped like the floor was electrified. Looking in the mirror was

the last thing I needed then: a frazzle of myself looked back with big black circles under my eyes.

I didn't think anything in the natural world would make me look like a normal mom to my daughter so I didn't even try. I pulled on a dressing gown and started down the stairs for the kitchen just in time to see the front door swing shut as Sudoku ran out with her backpack over her shoulder.

Oh. Wednesday. Early carpool. It seems I could have slept in, if you could call what I had been doing sleeping. I walked into the kitchen and started making coffee. When I finally sat down I found the note I had written to myself last night, "Every Jewish child needs five adults who guide her lovingly with words of Torah..." Right. Last night I had written down what Goldilocks from the Jewish Parenting seminar had told us and now it was time to do something about it.

I reflexively started dialing Adele without looking at the time, and got one of her daughters.

"Simcha," I said, "Who was that Torah teacher that everyone always talked about?"



"Mrs. Geva?" Simcha's tentative voice came over the wire, contrasting in my mind with the riotous mockery of the carpool hooting about the teacher they called Mrs. "Gevalte".

"That's right, that's it." I said. "Have a good day, Simcha."

Oh, how they had mocked that Mrs. "Gevalte." They had called her "Oy Gevalte". Could "Oy Gevalte" be the one to unlock the words of Torah for my daughter? It seemed unlikely, but I decided to try. I'd book an appointment with her after school. I left a message for Mrs. Geva and headed out to Pilates.

I was in the middle of pulling my shoulder blades down my back when my cell phone rang, and a strongly accented voice assaulted me. Just the sound of it reminded me of the kids' giggling that Oy Gevalte smelled like herring. This voice sounded like it was marinated in vinegary wine sauce.

"I'm Sudoku Levene's mom..." I began, but she stopped me with a barking, "Who?" and I said, "Sudoku, you know the girl who doesn't talk..." and she said, "Oh. Sarrah," in a pronunciation that sounded like the desert sands.

"Can I come in to see you, Mrs. Geva? Maybe tomorrow after school?" I had evidently chickened out from seeing her right away.

"Why not?"

Powered by coffee, pumped up by Pilates, an unfair parking ticket and a sleepless fugue, I was in full cell phone vent to Adele as I walked from my car in the driveway. The teacher wasn't remotely welcoming! She just said, "Why not?" Maybe the kids were right after all. She might be the Jewish Studies teacher but she was ancient and mean. Why was I going to see her anyway?



Before Adele could answer, I caught sight of Sudoku behind me. I whispered I had to go. Had Sudoku heard me? I dropped the phone casually in my bag, turned to my daughter, and said I would make her favourite dinner, macaroni and cheese. No smile.

An hour later Sudoku actually sat down to eat with me, nodding vaguely when I asked her questions. She did pass the milk when asked. When she went upstairs I loaded the dishwasher. Turning back to the table I saw a neat square of paper at her spot. I turned it over and read, "She's not."

What? Who? Then I remembered the conversation with Adele. Did she overhear me? I had said so many things about Mrs. Geva I couldn't even remember them. And here was my daughter, perhaps disagreeing with one or all the things I had said. She's not what? Old? Dictatorial? Smelling of herring?

"She's not"... it was the first communication with my daughter in a month and I didn't even know what it meant. Tomorrow, perhaps, I would find out.

**TO BE CONTINUED**

Marlee Pinsker has been a teacher at The Toronto Heschel School since 1996. Her stories have been published in various publications and in her own book of biblical stories *In the Days of Sand and Stars*. Marlee believes strongly that stories are vehicles for reflection as they allow the reader a private space to ponder the larger issues often sitting in unlit corners.