

№18 / SPRING 2016

# THiNK

THE  
LOLA  
STEIN  
INSTITUTE  
JOURNAL

Conversation about Education, Ethics, and Our Children

THE ART OF FOCUS / THOUGHT LEADERSHIP IN ACTION / MINDFUL JEWISH EDUCATION /  
IRENE BERKOWITZ ON NICHOLAS CARR: SCREENS AND COGNITION / SOUNDTRACK LEARNING /  
SCIENCE AND THE MIRACLE OF DISCOVERY / REDESIGNING CHILDHOOD WITH WHITE SPACE



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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.

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MY FAVOURITE BOOK IS SO DEEP

Irene S. Berkowitz, PhD



# Focus

## THE ART OF FULL PARTICIPATION

BY PAM MEDJUCK STEIN

“Look where we are!” Unbeknownst to me, my friend Ricki would call out the same words to her kids as I would to mine when arriving at new places on family vacations. While the cry prompted eight youngsters between us to gaze around at a new town or an unexplored cliffside, in truth, it did more. “Look where we are!” musters the bigger picture: “We are here. On our own together. Let’s explore. Let’s have fun.”

This issue of *Think* looks at focus and the art of consideration. It doesn’t matter whether children are staring down into the world’s deepest crevice in Iceland, ambling through a leafy park in Toronto, or engaging in a family Seder. To take advantage of their experiences, youngsters require a developed instinct to participate fully—with keen minds and open hearts.

Focus relates to paying attention, an idea well connected to students and learning. But what is this “paying” all about? Who is paying what, why, and for what? In commerce, to pay is to account for value received. In legalese, it’s called consideration. When we ask how ideas about accounting connect to reflection and contemplation, which comprise the second meaning of the word “consideration,” we discover that the ability to perceive value of many kinds has been a skill-based pursuit for a long, long time.

Consideration comes from the Latin verb *considerare*, meaning “to look at closely, to observe,” a composite of *com-* “with” and *sideris* “constellation” ([www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com)). “Taking account” translates literally to mean “observing the stars.” Perhaps this suggests that the immutable and universal provide a good standard and that the balance of “give and get” lies in the eyes of the observer. The etymology calls up the Torah’s invocation of Abraham whose covenantal journey for truth begins with the instruction to step out, look at the stars (Genesis 13:4) and go to himself *Lech lecha* (Genesis 13:1). Abraham was to act for himself and check out what’s what. The word later evolved into the French verb *considerer*, meaning “to reflect on or study.” Can we say that focus and, therefore, study begin with individual action that is independent, reflects truthfully, and is rewarded in kind? Maybe yes.

In “Awe and Wonder,” Greg Beiles notices the particular attributes of Jewish tradition and Judaic study that develop complex thinking from the youngest age and that deepen learning year by year. Dvora Goodman’s new *Think* column, “The Learning Centre,” shares successful school leadership

strategies that inform the quality of student learning and school culture, while Lisa Richler also inaugurates a new *Think* column, “Spotlight,” which will investigate the uniqueness of integrated pluralistic Jewish education.

*Think*’s “Special Feature: Focus and the Art of Consideration” presents inventive teaching methods that advance the skill to focus. Rachely Tal and Michelle Shulman describe the power that music and lyrics have to instill deep learning; Andrea Schaffer uses childhood wonder to foster fascination and her students’ desire for discovery; Lesley Cohen crafts lessons in poetry and personification that motivate Junior High students to feel and express empathy; and Daniel Abramson uncovers honest observation as the heart of inquiry into both science and mystery.

Parents and educators have to stay on task, too; there’s a critical role to play in helping youngsters navigate the unruly seas of activity and information in which they sail daily. As we move through 2016, our children continue to draw in certain bits of digital information and marginalize others. This wealth of opportunity is a great blessing if youngsters learn to curate the data meaningfully. Failing this, they may flounder in a flood of hodgepodge.

“Our Sages Tell Us” also looks at the stewardship of focus. In her column “Good Books,” Gail Baker recommends vantage points from which older and younger readers can reconsider the ways of the world as well as preconceptions that block the view.

Jasmine Eliav designs a clean, simple solution to the negative effects of children’s overcrowded minds and schedules; what some call “down time,” she calls “white space,” evoking painting and graphic art to delineate her advice. Irene Berkowitz synthesizes Nicholas Carr’s bestseller, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, with its history of intellectual technologies, beginning with the earliest book, and its analysis of the implications of the internet on young minds. Karen Chisvin examines Rabbi A. J. Heschel’s philosophy of time management; his small beloved volume, *The Sabbath*, shares his very Jewish perspective on sorting, spending, and valuing our days.

Our children can learn focus; they can know who they are, where they are, what they know, and how to optimize their experiences. We must consider it all and attend to their learning.

Look where we are!

To take advantage of their experiences, youngsters require a developed instinct to participate fully—with keen minds and open hearts.



Awareness of one's own learning process is an essential element in higher-order thinking.

## Eddies in Time

THE SPIRAL-LINEAR JEWISH CURRICULUM

BY GREG BEILES

In his lyrical and edifying book *The Sabbath*, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel describes the unique role that time plays in Judaism. While other civilizations build cathedrals and monuments, Judaism, says Heschel, creates an “architecture of time.” “Judaism is a religion of time aiming at the sanctification of time.”<sup>1</sup>

What is the nature of Jewish time? In his bestselling history, Thomas Cahill offers that one of the great contributions of Jewish thought to world culture is the idea of linear time. In *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels*, Cahill explains that most ancient civilizations regarded time as cyclical: days, seasons, years, life, and death all repeat in endless cycles. Biblical narratives, on the contrary, suggest a forward progression where events begin one place with a particular person and end somewhere else: Abraham and Sarah leave Ur to begin a nation whose future is foreseen in the stars; Moshe and Miriam initiate an Exodus from Egypt that is fulfilled a generation later in Eretz Israel. While ancient Babylon, Egypt, and even Greece perceived time as cyclical, the Jews, claims Cahill, introduced linear, advancing time that underpins the Western ideal of progress.<sup>2</sup>

I suggest that Cahill is half-correct. It was the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus, not a Jew, who stated, “No person ever steps in the same river twice,” for the river flows on, always changing, never staying the same. Conversely, it was a Jew, the wise King Solomon, who is credited with the words, “There is nothing new beneath the sun” (Kohelet); the wizened king spoke of the sun, the rivers, and the generations of humanity coming and going in endless cycles.

In fact, Jewish thought recognizes both linear and cyclical time. The fruitful question to ask is: What is the relationship between cycles and journeys, between reiterations and progressions? I propose that we consider a “spiral-linear” model for Jewish learning—a particularly Jewish kind of “spiral curriculum,” in which our cycles produce progression and our repetitions reveal discoveries.

As Jewish educators, we recognize Jewish cycles, first and foremost, in the holidays of the year. The annual roster of *chaggim* provides structure to our school curriculum. Each year students hear, once again, the narratives and rituals of Sukkot, Chanukah, Tu Bish’vat, Purim, Pesach, Lag B’Omer, and Shavuot. When they hear the same story each year, and revisit the laws and rituals associated with each holiday, children develop a standard vocabulary and framework. Basic knowledge is learned and repeated, as a foundation for more sophisticated analysis. Annually, students re-encounter familiar themes from new perspectives. A year older, they have different questions and new understandings about what it means for Pharaoh to harden his heart, for Esther to approach the king, for the Maccabees to start a revolution. Because the basic material is not new, there are far more opportunities for learning to extend more deeply. With remembered themes and narratives recurring, children

are primed to build on, link to, and revise previous thinking.

When they revisit previously encountered material and last year’s learning, students notice changes in their own thinking: “When I was five, I used to think..., now I realize...” This awareness of one’s own learning process is an essential element in higher-order thinking. Often referred to as metacognitive capacity, the ability to reflect on their own thinking allows learners to gain control of their learning process. They come to regard learning, not as passive absorption, but as an active and intentional act that they, as learners, can own and direct themselves over the years yet to come.

The spiral-linear Jewish curriculum is also an antidote to the modern culture of novelty and the relentless drive for newness that gives the mind no place to rest. If students deal only with new material, their learning remains superficial, while novelty provides the illusion of having learned more. Cycling annually through familiar holiday themes and material, students steady their footing on the plateau of the known, and then leap to the next height. Their most valuable gratification comes not from newness but from the satisfaction of accomplishment and mastery; they feel invigorated and confident and ready for the next challenge.

A stone placed in a river will cause a swirling eddy to form, a cycle in the midst of the linear flow of the stream. I can recall moments as a young child when I was fascinated by these swirls, and spent dreamy minutes peering into them. Eddies in rivers, and other natural cycles that seem to go nowhere, are openings that let the mind focus, travel, imagine, and wonder.

I have long considered Jewish rituals, especially the weekly ritual of Shabbat, to be like river stones in the flow of time. In my experience, Shabbat and other Jewish holidays are eddies in the river where family conversations spin, imaginative games show up, songs are sung, and stories come around at a leisurely pace. Sometimes we even float a bit in boredom, which, it turns out, can sail us off into an inventive mode of thought that we could never have entered in the busyness of the week.

It may indeed be that the progressive, innovative quality that Thomas Cahill attributes to Jewish thought is sourced in the cycles of Jewish time where focus, contemplation, and deep thinking are nurtured. I encourage Jewish educators to look to the spiral-linear structure of our tradition, to resist the temptation to “change it up” just for the sake of change. Instead, let’s notice how cycles, reiterations, and pedagogical “eddy” may be the sources we seek for focused, innovative thinking.

<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Cahill, *The Gift of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels* (New York: Anchor Books, 1998).

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



Literacy and numeracy skills improve with practise; so do abilities to concentrate, calm down, and control impulses.

## A Mindful Jewish Education

BY LISA RICHLER

*Think* magazine's Spotlight shines again, now as a regular *Think* column. Look for Lisa Richler's attentive insight into the who, how, and why behind the enriched program at her children's school. What makes the learning so joyful, the collaboration so abundant? What inspires such enthusiasm to make a difference? Why does this school work so well? Lisa has carefully watched the goings on at Toronto Heschel School as a parent for eight years and as a professional for three. Shalom, Lisa!

One Wednesday morning in late February, a class of JK students at The Toronto Heschel School follow their teachers in complete silence through the hallway into their darkened classroom. I watch as with minimal teacher prompting, the children find their spots on a large circular carpet and lie down on their backs. One teacher, Morah Vivi Ramu, instructs the children in Hebrew to take deep "belly breaths." A second teacher, Morah Kati Kovari, hands out small rubber figurines, which the students know to place on their bellies. Each child watches the figurine on his/her tummy as it rises and falls with every deep breath in and out. The students remain completely silent as they then follow a guided meditation to relax their bodies. After about five minutes, Morah Kati rings her round meditation bell, which makes a long sound that gradually fades into silence. When the students can no longer hear the bell, they quietly sit up.

Meanwhile, in a Grade 4 class, Morah Orly Borovitch uses her round meditation bell as a signal to her students to stop what they are doing and pay attention. Morah Orly shakes a mason jar full of water and blue sparkles and asks her students to take slow, deep breaths. "Watch as the sparkles slowly settle to the bottom of the jar," she tells the children. "Pretend that the water in this jar is your mind, and these

sparkles are your thoughts. Let's take a few moments to quiet our minds and clear our thoughts, just like the sparkles are settling down and clearing from the water."

On the same morning, students in the Junior High divide into various *minyanim* or groups for *tefillah kavanah*, which roughly translates as "mindful prayer." Once a week each minyan focuses on a different modality of prayer through art, drama, music, or meditation. In the art minyan, for instance, students concentrate on a specific word from the Amidah (a central Jewish prayer), perhaps choosing justice, righteousness, peace, or wisdom. For about half an hour, the students hold their specific word in their mind and use it to visualize in free association. In the meditation minyan, students engage in a "Listening *Shema*." Sitting with closed eyes, taking turns one after the other, and listening carefully for their cue, the students each recite a single word of the *Shema* until, word by word, the entire prayer is complete.

One might wonder what these activities have to do with learning. At The Toronto Heschel School, the ability to focus the mind is considered a fundamental academic skill. Just as literacy and numeracy skills improve with practise, so too do the abilities to concentrate, to calm down, and to control impulses. In fact, it is very difficult to learn a new concept

if you are distracted, unable to focus, or feeling stressed or out of control. Being able to focus is therefore essential for successful learning.

The Toronto Heschel School promotes the development of focused attention through the practice of "mindfulness." Mindfulness, or mindful awareness, is the act of paying attention to the present moment—to our thoughts and feelings, to other people, to the environment—in a considerate and non-judgmental way. In our hectic, multi-tasking, technology-laden lives, mindfulness offers techniques to calm down, to pause and take a breath, and to live consciously with intent and gratitude.

A growing body of research over the past few decades has found that mindfulness training has numerous psychological, emotional, and physical benefits, including increased attention, increased self-esteem, decreased anxiety and depression, decreased hyperactivity and impulsivity. Through MRI brain scans, researchers at the Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard University have shown that long-term mindfulness training can help thicken the cortical regions related to attention and sensory processing, and may offset the thinning of those areas that typically comes with aging. Mindfulness is widely considered an effective treatment for both adults and children with aggression, ADHD, anxiety, and depression.

In 1979, Jon Kabat-Zinn, a professor of medicine at the University of Massachusetts, developed the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program at the UMass Medical Center, which uses specific exercises to help patients dealing with chronic pain, stress, and anxiety. Mindfulness training has proven so effective that over the past 37 years, nearly a thousand Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction programs have developed across North America and the world, and training in mindfulness has moved beyond the medical field to other areas, including education. Since 2005, 14 studies of programs that train elementary and high school students in mindfulness practice have collectively demonstrated a range of cognitive, social, and psychological benefits, including improvements in working memory, attention, academic skills, social skills, emotional regulation, and self-esteem, as well as improvements in mood and decreases in anxiety, stress, and fatigue. In other words, there is good reason to promote mindfulness in the classroom.

But what does mindfulness have to do with Jewish education? Although mindfulness practice is adapted from Buddhist meditation traditions, it is also very much connected to thousands-of-years-old Jewish philosophy and practice. As Rabbi Jill Berkson Zimmerman, founder of the Jewish Mindfulness Network, puts it:

Mindfulness means slowing down, paying attention, being grateful, taking pauses to appreciate where you are, who you are, and whom you are with.... Interestingly, this is what Judaism, at its core, is all about: developing gratitude,

appreciating and blessing the moment, and pausing and seeing God in each single soul.<sup>1</sup>

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was an expert on the Jewish tradition of living in the here and now, appreciating each moment and seeing the world with awe and wonder. In his book, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*, Heschel wrote extensively about the sanctity of time in Judaism:

Judaism is a religion of time aiming at the sanctification of time...There are no two hours alike. Every hour is unique and the only one given at the moment, exclusive and endlessly precious... Judaism teaches us to be attached to holiness in time, to be attached to sacred events, to learn how to consecrate sanctuaries that emerge from the magnificent stream of a year.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, Judaism teaches us to appreciate and to be grateful for every moment in time.

Named for and inspired by Rabbi Heschel, The Toronto Heschel School aims to help students develop the skills and the habits that will enable them to actively practise their Jewish values. According to Toronto Heschel Head of School, Greg Beiles, "When you are more mindful, you are more aware of the need to do *Tikkun Olam* (repair of the world); but you're also more able to do it." Through mindful practices, students at The Toronto Heschel School develop the tools to calm themselves, to focus, to appreciate the present moment, and to think about their thinking and feelings—tools that are vital not only for successful learning but also for living a happier, healthier, more fulfilling, and more meaningful life.

<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Jill Zimmerman, "What Is Jewish Mindfulness?" *Cultivating a Jewish Path with Heart* website: <http://www.ravjill.com/the-jewish-mindfulness-network/what-is-jewish-mindfulness/>

<sup>2</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), p. 8.



The Learning Centre gives meaning to the school's philosophy of inspired teaching through continuous learning.

# Thought Leadership in Action

BY DVORA GOODMAN

*Think* is delighted to introduce “The Learning Centre,” with its columnist, Dvora Goodman. Dvora will examine thought leadership at The Toronto Heschel School along with the strategies that make for great learning. Dvora is Coordinator at The Lola Stein Institute and a four-year Toronto Heschel parent. She is also an expert educational coach and consultant to professional leaders in Jewish day schools, supplementary schools, and summer camps in Toronto and across North America. Shalom, Dvora!

## What Does Good Teacher Training Look Like?

Throughout my career as a Jewish educator, I have found myself drawn to programs that give educators ongoing opportunities to grow and learn. I found it first at Keshet, the Community Hebrew School after School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and then at Genesis, the summer program for high school students at Brandeis University in Boston. Both invested tremendous time and energy in teacher training and curriculum development.

At Keshet, the children would arrive at 2:30 p.m., but teachers started three hours earlier at 11:30 a.m. It was highly unusual for an afternoon Hebrew school to provide so much time for teacher preparation. The direct result was highly creative and productive supplementary Jewish education. At Genesis, each educator was paired with a mentor for individual advisory attention all summer long and practised reflective learning in weekly group meetings.

I spent 14 professional years at Brandeis, the last three as Director of Genesis. To coach and inspire faculty was core to our mission. We knew that the quality of our program hinged on our educators' personal and professional growth; we also knew this would not occur by spontaneous combustion. There were two necessary conditions: (1) program leaders who prioritized professional learning; and (2) teachers who valued the effort required and welcomed mentorship.

The key to our celebrated success at Genesis lay in hiring educators who brought both teaching experience and enthusiasm for professional growth. During our interview process, we described the teacher learning available and asked applicants what skills they might improve over the summer. Almost every candidate evinced excitement at the prospect of time on the job devoted to their own learning,

but those who ultimately proved most successful were the ones who spoke honestly about their track record and had the confidence to tackle self-improvement.

My experience, as an educator and coach, convinces me that the strongest educational programs offer this level of professional enhancement to their teaching staff. Regrettably, not every school or program makes it a priority. Many do not afford educators the time to step back and review their progress, what they are achieving with their students, and how they are achieving it. It takes considerable leadership focus to initiate and build in the right administrative structure to get this done.

Organizational planning is essential. Even the most naturally reflective educators get busy with the everyday challenges: children needing attention, parents needing dialogue, new projects, and so on. The key is to structure a routine that carves out time for teacher learning on a regular basis.

A mentoring routine extricates teachers from classroom duties to attend to the theoretical aspects of how they teach, how their students respond, and how they could improve. Periodic professional development days are not enough. While the full day removes teachers from class to meet new ideas, it cannot offer them meaningful exploration into how to apply the new ideas. Experience tells me that the most influence on enhancing educators' skills comes through ongoing mentoring, combined with periodic focused learning.

When I brought my children to The Toronto Heschel School four years ago, part of the draw was the quality of its teaching staff and the overall thoughtful educational environment. I did not know the kind of teacher support provided but the results looked good. I was thrilled to discover that the school was developing an innovative model of peer mentorship for its teachers called the Learning Centre.

## What Is The Toronto Heschel Learning Centre?

The Toronto Heschel Learning Centre is an exceptional and unique teacher-training model. It was established to attain, activate, and maintain several critical streams of excellence in the school. As a school leadership forum, it contemplates the school as a whole—curriculum, school culture, and operations.

The Learning Centre demonstrates the school's philosophy of excellence through continuous learning, reinforcing the twin fundamentals of this ethos: academic excellence and professional excellence. The model recognizes that school leaders bring different strengths to the mission and that structured collaboration between colleagues shares these talents throughout the organization and across leadership ranks. Large corporations have department champions who ensure their teams are supported and advanced; small organizations mentor key individuals with personalized training to broaden horizons and hone skills; Jewish study groups enrich learners' minds and delve into what makes us tick and who we are. The Toronto Heschel Learning Centre is all of this.

Each year The Learning Centre designates a cohort of teachers and department heads, each with expertise in a particular academic discipline, to participate as a team in the Centre. As a whole, the team collaborates weekly on teaching method and technique. Team members clarify, innovate, codify, and consolidate the school curriculum on an ongoing basis; their goal is to verify effective delivery of the curriculum and school culture to the students and share best practices. Each team member also mentors other teachers in the school, meeting regularly to troubleshoot classroom teaching challenges and offer expertise on the academic discipline that is their specialty.

It is a visible cycle of appreciable betterment. Through their work with individual teachers and their systematic collaboration at team meetings, the mentors advance their own skills and observe leadership lessons across the team. This augments their contributions to the Learning Centre's evolving roster of best practices, which, in turn, spreads the expertise across the teaching faculty, reaching ultimately to the children's experience at school. The children provide their teachers with never-ending new challenges, so again the Learning Centre experts are called in and the cycle is renewed.

The Learning Centre team also represents the school at the Shalom Hartman Senior Educators Forum, which is held eight months of the year. Sponsored by The Lola Stein Institute, Learning Centre members study Jewish text with world-class scholars, deepening their Judaic learning and connecting with educational leaders from other day and congregational schools in the Toronto area.

Toronto Heschel Head of School Greg Beiles told me about the changes that he has seen in the school and among the staff since the Learning Centre was launched:

The approach has created many positive outcomes: New teachers see veteran teachers as having expertise. Teachers see themselves as having expertise... Years ago, I used to hear conversations in the staff room where teachers would tell other teachers that something was challenging in their class but that they did not want to talk about it. This is not how things are now... I hope we continue to create a place where colleagues want to share ideas and challenges with each other. It is our collective responsibility to create the best possible learning environment for children.

This model of teachers learning and reflecting collaboratively with a common goal to improve our children's learning, is fascinating. It may be one of the “best kept secrets” of the school. I feel that parents and the Toronto community should know more about what goes on in the Learning Centre at Toronto Heschel. We want our children to become learners who strive for their best, ask questions thoughtfully, and think critically. It is comforting to know that their school nurtures this in its teachers.

I am reminded of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's famous statement, “The teacher is the text the students never forget.” When we raise up our teachers and school leaders through professionalism and inspiration, we help our children become the learners we know they can be.

## The Toronto Heschel Learning Centre 2015–2016 Member Portfolio

**Daniel Abramson** Environmental Sciences & Art

**Ronit Amihude** Child Study & Civilizations (Jr. High)

**Greg Beiles** Judaic Studies (Elementary & Jr. High)

**Lesley Cohen** Literacy & Civilizations (Jr. High)

**Judith Leitner** Integrated Arts

**Shachar Leven** Hebrew (Elementary & Jr. High)

**Talya Metz** Integrated Curriculum (Early Years)

**Malka Regan** Literacy, Math, & Integrated Curriculum (Elementary)

**Edna Sharet** Hebrew & Integrated Curriculum (Jr. High)

**Rachely Tal** Hebrew & Judaics (Early Years & Elementary)

**Marissa Unruh** Math (Elementary & Junior High)

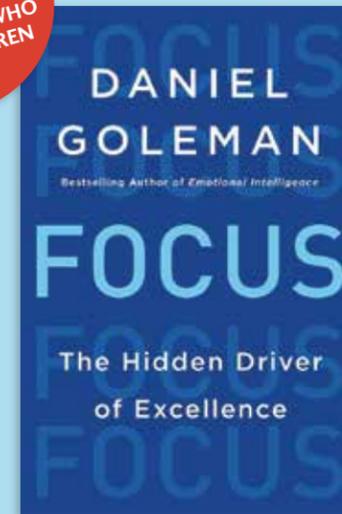
# Good Books by Gail Baker

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHILDREN AND THE PEOPLE WHO LOVE THEM

BY GAIL BAKER

Gail Baker is a renowned teacher, principal, mother, and grandmother. Gail has spent her career teaching and reaching children in Toronto since 1977. She co-founded The Toronto Heschel School in 1996 and retired as Head of School in 2014. *Think* asked Gail to suggest books that look at the theme of focus. Her fascinating selections broaden our view of what it means to focus and our appreciation of what paying attention can bring into view.

2  
GOOD BOOKS  
FOR PEOPLE WHO  
LOVE CHILDREN



**FOCUS: The Hidden Driver of Excellence by Daniel Goleman (HarperCollins, 2013)**

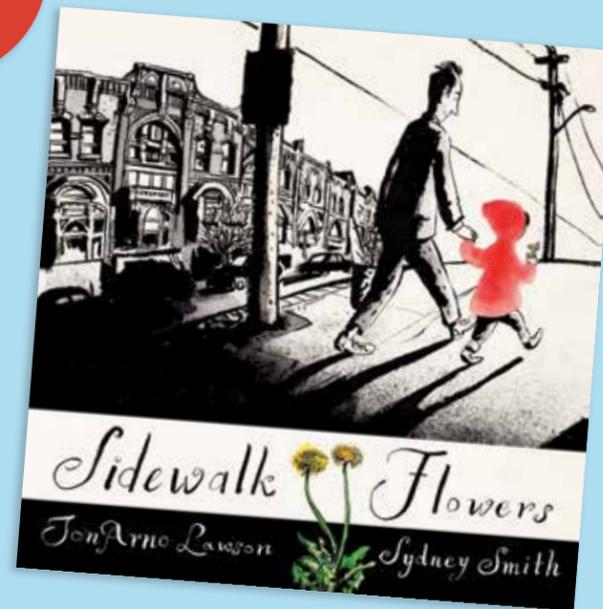
The guru of emotional intelligence, Daniel Goleman, offers more insight into personal achievement and well-being. He explains the social and neurological factors that underlie our capacity to focus and why it serves us well to learn mindful focus. Goleman presents focus, not as the narrowing of our sights on a particular target, but as a neural harmony where engagement, skill, and interest align.

2  
GOOD BOOKS  
FOR CHILDREN



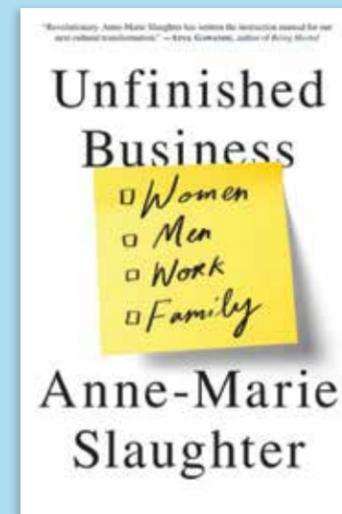
**Beautiful Hands by Kathryn Otoshi and Bret Baumgarten. Illustrated by Kathryn Otoshi (Blue Dot Press, 2015)**

Its simple evocative questions, makes *Beautiful Hands* a book for readers of all ages. It asks, "What will your beautiful hands do today?" Questions and answers suggest the concrete yet remain open to the abstract. The stunning illustrations guide attention back to the many-layered messages. Both adult and child will enjoy moments that extend our thinking and remind us to notice our potential.



**Sidewalk Flowers by Jon Arno Lawson. Illustrated by Sydney Smith (Groundwood Books, 2015)**

In this wordless yet charming book, illustrations tell the story. Lawson and Smith demonstrate how attention and empathy wondrously enrich the experience of living. For example, simply paying attention to a flower adds colour to the city. *Sidewalk Flowers* doesn't blame the distracted Dad for missing everything, although he misses a lot. The message is more that his daughter notices the beauty of the every day, and through her sense for the aesthetic and her compassion for others, the world lights up around her.



**Unfinished Business by Anne-Marie Slaughter (Random House Canada, 2015)**

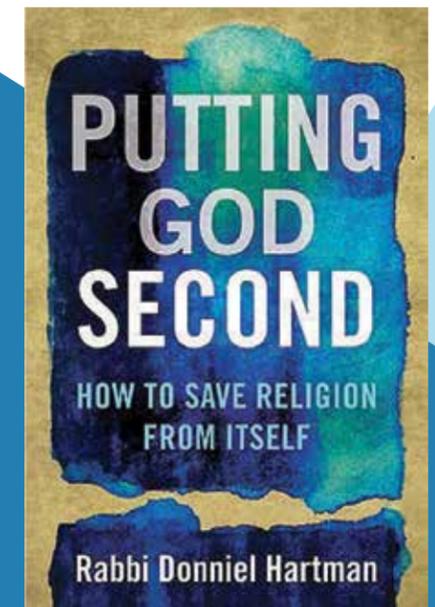
Regardless of gender, "the person in a couple who stays home will be valued less than the person who goes to the office." Anne-Marie Slaughter explores how our society chooses to "value competition and penalize care." She shifts the focus from looking at this as a woman's issue to looking at it as a societal problem. She lays out a "caring society," where the workplace is family friendly for men and women and where raising children has become a national priority.



## Putting God Second

HOW TO SAVE RELIGION FROM ITSELF

In *Putting God Second*, Rabbi Dr. Donniel Hartman tackles one of modern life's most urgent and vexing questions: Why are the great monotheistic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—chronically unable to fulfill their own self-professed goal of creating individuals infused with moral sensitivity and societies governed by the highest ethical standards?



Book available at:

Beacon Press - [beacon.org](http://beacon.org)

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# The Art of Focus

To pay attention  
is to hear, see, feel,  
and wonder.



Because they owned the song, they owned the story it told.

## Learning by Soundtrack

THEME SONGS WITH BIG IDEAS

BY MICHELLE SHULMAN AND RACHELY TAL

Music creates a soundtrack for our lives. We sing the alphabet in the tune that we learned when we were young. Warm summer breezes and old friends come to mind when we hear hit songs from our teens. A melodic *tefillah* (prayer) awakens the feeling of awe and of standing with our grandparents in shul years ago. We remember the lyrics of the evocative ballads of yesteryear: glimpses into love, sorrow, heartache, crazy rebellion, and happy homecoming. We sing them still today.

In contrast, while we remember our favourite books, most probably we can't recite even the very best paragraph that we read last week. Perhaps the songs of our past stay buried deep in our hearts and memories because they were multi-sensory experiences; we listened, sang, felt, walked, and danced them. Music is such a powerful force. It is fascinating to see how it helps children learn.

The Toronto Heschel School uses song as a similar kind of experiential learning. The school sets overarching themes, called "big ideas," to coordinate students' lessons across the academic disciplines and then uses songs to engage, enthuse, and teach younger students how to understand these important themes. When kept front and centre, concepts that are both significant and multi-faceted can deepen a child's overall learning, whether studying math, science, language arts, Torah, visual arts, or Hebrew. For example, in younger grades, one Toronto Heschel big idea is that "we tell stories to teach values," while in higher grades, big ideas include "form conveys meaning" and "to create a complete society we cannot exclude the voices of others."

In the younger grades, songs that reflect the themes of the "big idea" unify the program at transition points during the day. As the class moves through its daily routine, the little children sing their theme song repeatedly and come to recognize that the song reflects what they are learning

in their various lessons—perhaps environmental studies or social studies. For example, the Grade 1 teacher creates and teaches an original Hebrew song for each big idea all year long. She keeps to familiar melodies so that the children can learn the song easily. Lyrics include multiple verses, each followed by a chorus reiterating the "big idea." It's not a complicated process, but it's a very complex educational plan.

The intellectual and experiential connections the children make between their course studies and their class theme (the big idea) open their minds to extended implications and relationships in the material they are studying. In the song set out on the next page, we see how the days of creation frame ecological relationships even as the focus of the song is the narrative of Genesis. Relationships later learned in math and science classes are introduced as they sing that the sun, moon, and stars make the days and the months; the holiness of Shabbat is created by the human combination of challah, wine, and candles, and the children learn that, like God, we too, are creators. They sing these ideas all day long and the thought processes jell.

The song's Hebrew lyrics are second-language vocabulary that the children can use to express their thoughts. The words become familiar, their meanings are understood, and their usage becomes natural. It is enrichment in action. The simple fun songs provide an axis for deep contextual meaning while simultaneously facilitating fluency in Hebrew. In the terminology of cognitive science, the songs promote *automacity*, "a component of language fluency which involves both knowing what to say and producing language rapidly without pauses."<sup>1</sup>

Grade 2 raises the theme song to a new level. In the first half of the school year, the second grade's big idea is to appreciate diversity in the world: "*Kol chaya leminah*" (Every

creature is created with its own characteristics). Connecting the curriculum to the flow of the Jewish calendar, the students also begin their year studying the story of Genesis and, with their teacher, craft their very own Hebrew theme song about the seven days of creation. They study the biblical text and help to choose the melody, words, and hand motions for their song. Later, for their parents and entirely in biblical Hebrew, they perform their dramatic eight-minute piece of beautiful music.

Last year, after the lyrics describing each day of creation, the chorus was sung, "*Vayehi erev vayehi boker, yom rishon/sheni...*" (And there was evening, and there was morning, the first/second day...). To all of us listening, it was clear that each second-grade child knew and understood the biblical narrative inside out. There were changes in tune, speed, and tone for each day, depending on what was created. There were accompanying hand motions to dramatize the events. And there was enthusiasm for everything.

By *yom shishi* (day six) and the creation of animals and humans, the tempo had picked up to a good clip, showing much excitement for the arrival of humans and all sorts of animals. Because the children had worked on and created the song themselves, it was their own. Because they owned the song, they owned the story it told, and this proprietary feeling delivered to them the many new Hebrew words that told the story. It was clear that the entire Grade 2 class was completely engaged in the experience of relating the process, the details, and the drama of the Torah narrative. It wasn't so much a performance as a real communication.

There is considerable research in the field of education as to why music deepens learning. Laurence O'Donnell has reflected on the Mozart effect theories of 25 years ago and wrote "Music and the Brain" in 1999, explaining how music affects memory because it activates the left and right sides

## A Big Idea in Grade 1

בריאה ועוד בריאה יוצרות בריאה חדשה.

בריאה ועוד בריאה יוצרות בריאה חדשה,  
אור וחושך יוצרים לנו יום.  
בריאה ועוד בריאה יוצרות בריאה חדשה,  
מים, שמים ורקיע יוצרים עננים, גשמים ושקלים.  
בריאה ועוד בריאה יוצרות בריאה חדשה,  
דשא, עשב, זרעים ועצים יוצרים פרות וירקות.  
בריאה ועוד בריאה יוצרות בריאה חדשה,  
שמש, ירח וכוכבים יוצרים ימים חדשים ושנים.  
בריאה ועוד בריאה, אגמים ימים ונהרות,  
יוצרים מקום לדגים, לשרצים ולעופות.  
בריאה ועוד בריאה, דשא, עשב ועצים,  
יוצרים מאכל לאדם ולחיות.  
בריאה ועוד בריאה, חלה, יין ונרות,  
יוצרים הכל בשביל שבת הקדושה.

Creations Join Together to Create Something New

Creations together make new creations;  
Light and dark give us day  
Creations together make new creations;  
Water, sky, and the expanse become clouds, rain, and snow  
Creations together make new creations;  
Plants, seeds, and trees produce fruit and vegetables  
Creations together make new creations;  
The sun, moon, and stars make days, months, and years  
One creation then another;  
Lakes and rivers provide place for fish, creatures, and birds  
One creation then another;  
Plants, seeds, and trees grow food for people and animals  
One creation then another;  
Challah, wine, and candles provide all we need for the sacred Sabbath

of the brain simultaneously, thereby increasing the brain's capacity to acquire and retain information.<sup>2</sup>

In *Music and Learning: Seven Ways to Use Music in the Classroom*, Chris Brewer<sup>3</sup> writes that music provides three important levels of learning by

- activating students mentally, physically, and emotionally and creating learning states that enhance understanding of learning material.
- stabilizing mental, physical, and emotional rhythms to attain a state of deep concentration and focus in which large amounts of content information can be processed and learned.
- improving memory of content facts and details through rhyme, rhythm, and melody.

Ludwig van Beethoven is known to have said, "Music is the electrical soil in which the spirit lives, thinks, and invents." Toronto Heschel uses music throughout the grades as one of many techniques to ensure the children are learning from what they are understanding. Just as we remember the songs of our childhood, teens, and twenties, these students will speak the words and remember the ideas in the music they composed and sang at school.

1 E. Garbonton and N. Segalowitz, "Creative Automization: Principles for Promoting Fluency within a Communicative Framework," *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (September 1988), pp. 473–492.

2 Laurence O'Donnell, "Music and the Brain" (1999), available at <http://www.cerebro-mente.org.br/n15/mente/musica.html>

3 Chris Brewer, *Music and Learning: Seven Ways to Use Music in the Classroom* (Saint Paul, MN: Zephyr Press, 1995).

Rachely Tal is a Grade One Hebrew teacher at The Toronto Heschel School. Michelle Shulman is the Vice-Chair of The Lola Stein Institute and a Toronto Heschel School parent.

Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement...get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed.

—Abraham Joshua Heschel

## The Big Grade 2 Wow

RADICAL AMAZEMENT EVERY DAY

BY ANDREA SCHAFFER

Rabbi Heschel reminds us that when God created the world, God looked at each day's work with appreciation, "And God saw that it was good" (Genesis 1:10) "אָררָו מִיְהוָה יֵשׁ בּוֹטֵ" .

In the Grade 2 community at The Toronto Heschel School, we learn to appreciate the good in all creation, to notice the miracles in everyday life, and see the world through eyes of awe and wonder. When we educators think carefully about this teaching, we see it is a lesson that we must consciously and intentionally teach our students. Why? Why is it important to see the world with appreciation, through eyes of awe and wonder?

In short, to be amazed is to notice and appreciate. With appreciation comes the desire to be considerate and responsible. Our young ones will more likely become socially conscious and responsible adults if they understand the cause and effect of their actions and if they notice and appreciate their natural surroundings.

The school year in Grade 2 begins with all this in mind. Summer comes to an end; fall paints our landscape with shades of red; and Rosh Hashanah celebrates the creation of the world. Effortlessly we have the perfect opportunity for a unit on awe and wonder. The new crop of children enter a new classroom in a different part of the school; they are already awed to be learning with the "big kids." They start the year with great curiosity and wonder, eager to get learning and implement the skills they developed the year before.

This stage of child development is the perfect time to open children's eyes to the miracles of the world. The only words hanging on the classroom walls set out the year's first generative topic: God teaches us to see the world through eyes of awe and wonder. It is a singular message that the fresh students read as they enter. The English words are followed by the Torah text in Hebrew—*Vayera Adonai ki tov* (transliterated)—"And God saw that it was good."

What I love most about starting the year this way is that it allows me to build on the children's natural abilities and innate strengths. Adults often go through their days not noticing the miracles around them, overlooking the beauty of the flowers and missing the shapes of the clouds floating above. Children notice, and when they are encouraged to notice, they pay even more attention.

A child walking through a garden will stop to take a moment to stare at the giant sunflower growing taller and taller as a sight to behold. It might be because he has never seen such a flower before or because the flower is extra large compared to his short stature. But also, a child may stop simply because she can focus on what is truly amazing about something right in front of her very eyes. Whatever the reason, children are more eager, more capable, and more willing than adults to look at the world and notice the miracles within it.

Children can look at the beauty in nature and just say, "Wow," when the "wow" is truly appropriate. This innate ability is something on which I build. My challenge, though, is how to teach the children to treasure this essential childhood capacity and how to orientate them to hold onto it as they grow up. As a teacher I find "how" to be the greatest question. It is easy to tell the students to focus on the beauty of the world, but how do we bring them to do it habitually? How do we teach them why it matters?

We learn best by doing. With this in mind and this early in the year, I engage my students in authentic experiences in beautiful natural settings and open their eyes to awe and wonder.

At The Toronto Heschel School we are blessed with a beautiful natural space outside the school. We have an enormous playing field with a tall strong willow tree as a centrepiece. At the back of the field lies our Heschel Garden

where all grades plant garden beds and, over the year, see and taste the fruits of their labours. The garden is a place for exploration and, of course, amazement. So naturally, my unit on awe and wonder begins in the garden.

My students probe through the garden searching for "wow" moments. They shout out a loud "wow" when they spot something amazing. To help them discover awe-inspiring artifacts in nature, I teach the children to be human cameras.

It takes two people to snap a picture with a human camera. One student, the camera, closes her eyes while the other student, the photographer, leads the "camera" to a point of interest. Human camera pictures are taken on a micro setting, so the photographer needs to take the "camera's lens," her friend's eyes, as close to the object as is possible. When the photographer says "snap," signalling the photo has been taken, the "camera" opens her eyes to focus in awe on the amazing piece of nature.

When we return to our classroom we sketch our "wow" moments and our photographs taken with the human cameras. We are also studying poetry and we learn that beautiful language helps us describe what we see in the world; we discover that poetry comes through the unique set of a poet's eyes. One student, wowed by the branch of a perfect climbing tree growing through the fence into our garden, described what he saw as an "outstretched arm lifting me up."

By the second month of school the students are constantly sharing their "wow" moments with me. They have

come to understand that Torah teaches us to see what is good in creation. Towards Yom Kippur we visit the Shoreside Kavannah Garden to perform *Tashlich* by the river bank and experience the sights and sounds of a small running river. The children also investigate the garden and learn blessings for encounters with nature.

The science component of this unit of awe and wonder sees the students exploring the Earth's great water cycle, the interconnectedness of bodies of water, and the power of air. By the end of the unit not only can my students explain the scientific terms and properties of water and air but they also show a real appreciation for nature and that which they encounter daily. Fresh water becomes a precious commodity, the stillness of air becomes something noticed, and the power of wind, which amazes us as we run outside capturing it in large garbage bags, becomes a means to create electricity—this is learning that gets a big Grade 2 WOW!

At Toronto Heschel, Grade 2 students develop many important skills. For me, it is their ability to focus on the beauty of the natural world and their learning how to see the miracles in the every day. I hope they carry these with them over their lifetime.

**Andrea Schaffer** is an alumna of the DeLet Program for Jewish Educators at Brandeis University and its Masters of Teaching Program. She taught in Boston at the Jewish Community Day School, lived in Israel, and is "thrilled" to be at The Toronto Heschel School.



We learn to appreciate the good in all creation.

# Covering the Challah's Eyes

## EMPATHY AND PERSONIFICATION

BY LESLEY COHEN

On Friday nights, Jews around the world cover their challot as they first bless the wine, lest the challah becomes jealous of its companion. In shul, we kiss a Torah or a fallen siddur, treating these holy objects like beloved children.

It is easy to take such actions for granted and view them as rote traditions, developed over centuries and re-enacted mechanically. However, if we probe deeper, these sentimental phenomena pose larger questions: Why does our tradition encourage us to see objects such as challot or siddurim as having hearts, souls, or intellects? Why should we develop sensitivity to the imagined feelings of things that are not living? What purpose does personification achieve?

Every grade at The Toronto Heschel School begins its language arts curriculum in September with a poetry unit. This way, students begin their studies attending to expression, creative thought, and emotion, rather than worrying immediately about where to place a period or a comma. In Grade 6, we meet our poetry through the technique of personification—the act of giving human attributes to inanimate objects and abstract ideas. The students seem to understand the idea of personification intuitively. They recognize it all around them, fondly remembering the dish that ran away with the spoon and, of course, how they sang along to Lumiere's musings and Nemo's adventures.

While these childhood examples hook the students into

the core concept of personification whimsically, the true power of this rhetorical device is more profound than what nursery rhymes or Disney suggest. When we personify an object, we are invoking the power of our imaginations to transform something inert into a living, breathing being, one whose experiences of the world mirror our own. Once inanimate objects are imbued with human attributes, we find that we attune to them differently, most likely because we are able to empathize with them on the level of human experience. Our attention refocuses in new ways and our sensitivity to their predicament or nature heightens.

When we give life and dimension to objects that we encounter, we seem to find our own humanity reflected within them. Personification is thus nothing less than a strategy to develop a profound sense of empathy. A child who can begin to identify with the experience of a locker that has been damaged can become more attuned to the pain of a peer who has been injured; one who empathizes with a lonely soccer ball on a field is more likely to notice a lonely friend.

At Toronto Heschel we ground our learning in an appreciation of model texts, and to begin our poetry unit, my Grade 6 class studies the poem "Mirror" by Sylvia Plath.<sup>1</sup> The poem encapsulates the relationship between a woman and her mirror across many years. At first, the mirror introduces itself as having "no preconceptions," "swallow[ing] immediately"

whatever it sees, "unmistaken by love or dislike." The mirror declares its virtue, stating, "I am not cruel, only truthful."

When the woman enters the poem in the second stanza, Plath deepens her portrait of the mirror, transforming it into a metaphorical lake over which the woman bends, "searching [its] reaches for who she really is." The woman's pleading gaze, desperately seeking affection and validation, is reflected honestly, and the mirror is "rewarded [only] with tears and an agitation of hands."

When my students break down the poem and delve into Plath's brilliantly evocative words, they discover an entirely new perspective through the *mirror's* experience of the world. The mirror is much more than a piece of reflective glass. Travelling through the verses it becomes a helpless truth-teller, a scorned companion, and a naive vessel reluctantly transporting its human cargo through time. With our focus on the mirror's experience rather than on the woman's, we readers are challenged to feel what it might be like to have no agency, to be incapable, like the mirror, of altering our interactions with the people we encounter every day.

When exploring personification through texts like "Mirror," my students learn to animate their descriptions of their own experiences of the world in unexpected ways. As they attend to sharing and understanding the feelings of the mirror—or a caged bird singing songs of freedom, or a mushroom pushing its way through cracks in the sidewalk—they sense what it feels like to live with greater empathy.

Such model texts have inspired my students to write lines of poetry that are truly beautiful: a tree "whispering secrets to the wind"; a pencil "blowing its black breath on a smooth canvas"; a trampoline that feels constrained as "metal snakes wrap around [its] tense body." Evoking the experience of moss growing on a tree, one student wrote,

I spread beautifully,  
Coating my companion like a jacket  
My curly hairs grow in and out of his rough, textured body  
He is a part of me,  
And now,  
I am a part of him.

As our unit progresses, my students learn that even abstract ideas can be personified and they consider the potency of phrases such as "opportunity knocks" and "time waits for no one." Personifying ideas and abstract thoughts lets them see that it works, not only as a way to heighten sensitivities to people and things but also as a very useful vehicle for *personal* reflection. For example, because the poetry unit takes place in early fall, I employ the technique of personification to explore the Jewish experience on Yom Kippur.

I ask my Grade 6 students to contemplate a vow that they might make on Yom Kippur as an animate being, passing through the same stages of life as a person would. First, the vow is born of conscious intention, and it then must be

enacted or activated. Like people, however, vows are fallible; they can stumble in their pursuit of fulfillment. My students reflect on how their own vows are born and enacted; how they stumble and, ultimately, get back up. Our Yom Kippur studies are enriched when we tie this reflection into our considerations of the more traditional notions of what it means to do *Teshuvah* (repentance).

### When we personify an object, we are invoking the power of our imaginations.

Engaging in this kind of writing brings my young students to look inward in ways that capture their personal struggles and concerns. Last year, for his Yom Kippur preparation, one student personified his commitment to be more responsible and to place his "needs" ahead of his "desires." About the vow's stumbling stage, he wrote:

I block out the sound  
Of responsibility calling  
Time has betrayed me  
A misleading illusion  
The shadow consuming  
My vow—  
Ripped between two choices  
The needs must be first  
I have betrayed myself.

By the time my students bid farewell to their poetry unit in November, they notice personification everywhere—in advertisements on TV, in books they read, and in movies they watch. Most importantly, though, they appreciate how personification leverages their ability to perceive things on deeper levels and to use their imaginations empathetically. Now, when they cover the challah or kiss a fallen siddur, they understand that it is not an empty custom but a gentle invocation of humanity in our traditions.

Emotions and relationships animate our world and keep it alive. Because empathy lies at the heart of relationships, I cherish the technique of personification for its ability to help my students recognize or imagine the humanity in everything that they encounter. This recognition will enhance their thinking, their connections with peers and loved ones, and also nurture deeper bonds to the rich traditions in which they participate.

<sup>1</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Collected Poems*, edited by Ted Hughes (New York: Buccaneer Books, 1981), p. 173.

**Lesley Cohen** received her teaching degree at OISE (UofT) and also holds a B.A. in Psychology and an M.A. in Religion and Cultural Studies. She teaches Grade 6 and Junior High music at The Toronto Heschel School.

I cherish the technique of personification for its ability to help my students recognize or imagine the humanity in everything that they encounter.

# Science and the Miracle of Discovery

BY DANIEL ABRAMSON

Think back to a time when you were truly amazed by something. How did it feel to stand in awe, face to face with something so full of wonder that it stopped you in your tracks? When did you last feel a miracle? Was it this morning? Is it possible that it was, but you failed to notice? It's hard to imagine that we just walk past miracles, but we do it every day! Miracles demand more than "Look and see." Miracles demand, "Look and notice!"

Rabbi Yisroel ben Eliezer, who was also known as the Baal Shem Tov, had a lot to say about miracles and wonder. He lived in the Ukraine in the 1700s and was the founder of Hasidic Judaism. It is said that the Baal Shem Tov taught, "The world is full of wonders and miracles, but people take their little hands and cover their eyes and see nothing."

Similarly, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote about miracles and wonder. He lived in Poland and America in the 1900s and also engaged with Jewish mysticism, as well as ethics. Heschel connects the ability to see with the capacity to recognize wonder in the world:

Wonder goes beyond knowledge... Wonder is a state of mind in which we do not look at reality through the latticework of our memorized knowledge, in which nothing is taken for granted. Spiritually, we cannot live by merely reiterating borrowed or inherited knowledge. Inquire of your soul what does it know, what does it take for granted. It will tell you only nothing is taken for granted; each thing is a surprise; being is unbelievable.<sup>1</sup>

Some might question what role would be played by mysteries of the soul and spirit in the pursuit of worldly knowledge. A better investigation is to ask how worldly knowledge features in mysteries of the soul and spirit. How might we achieve a state of mind where we can ask our soul what it knows? Can our soul teach us to take nothing for granted? How do we become surprised again?

The "little hands" that the Baal Shem Tov sees covering our eyes and Heschel's "latticework of our memorized knowledge" teach the same lesson; when we rely too heavily on what we know, we stop noticing what we don't. The impediment to wonder is not the vast body of worldly learning but how we apply our knowledge. If we ask ourselves, "How do we take our 'little hands' away from our eyes?" The answer is one short word...science.

Through science we see our world accurately, our view unobscured by the latticework of memorized knowledge. The scientific method proceeds step by step. Nothing is taken for granted and science reveals many surprising elements

in what we thought was mundane. I teach science in such a way that my students awaken to everyday amazement. For example, when we study astronomy, we observe and record the movements of the moon and the changing angle and length of shadows from hour to hour over a span of two weeks. These observations reveal to students how our civilization's great thinkers first built theories about days, months, changing seasons, and the movements of the planets before telescopes were invented.

Methodical scientific inquiry transforms my students' passive seeing into active looking. It fosters clear focus, not only on the physical world but also on the path of soulful inquiry that Heschel contemplates. We stare into the mystery.

Moses' encounter with the burning bush models that the prerequisite conditions for recognizing wonder in the world are curiosity, inquiry, and true observation. While the procedure Moses follows does not parallel the steps of the scientific method exactly, the core elements of scientific thinking are present in the story. In Exodus 3:2, the Torah says,

Now Moses was keeping the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the farthest end of the wilderness, and came to the mountain of God, unto Horeb.

And the angel of the LORD appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed.

And Moses said: "I will turn aside now, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt."

And when the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said: "Moses, Moses." And he said: "Here am I."

And He said: "Draw not nigh hither; put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground."

We see Moses tending his flock and noticing an angel in the midst of a fire; the apparition signals that something worth his attention is happening. Moses doesn't happen to see a bush, the text reads that he "looked and beheld." The actions are active and exemplify the curiosity, openness, and observation that are crucial to scientific inquiry.

Next, Moses turns and articulates the question of his investigation: "Why is this bush not consumed by the fire?" With this question, revelation transpires and God speaks. The miracle happens when Moses breaks free from the latticework of his knowledge and inquires curiously into something right in front of him. Miraculous potential had existed

all along, but the miracle emerges and merges with the sanctity of learning, of experiencing the "Eureka!" moment.

We are not accustomed to considering our biblical ancestors as scientists. It took another 3,000 years for the Scientific Revolution to validate a rational approach to the mysteries of the natural world. However, Judaic text has always recommended rational clear thinking; like Moses, we must notice, ask, and think. If we look, we learn. Actively and intentionally, we must seek the signs and signals of miraculous moments (Wow! Look at that!) and the revelatory moments of understanding (Eureka! I get it!).

The word "mindfulness" describes looking inwards with intention, yet I struggled to find a word for the act of looking outwards intentionally, what scientists do and Heschel recommends. At last I came upon "extrospection," an uncommon, but perfect, word for how we teach science at The Toronto Heschel School. From JK to Grade 8, Toronto Heschel students use the scientific method to turn their focus outwards to notice what is around them. Through this inquiry, they discover the world and the wonder.

In 1928, the French poet and playwright Edmond Fleg published an essay describing his personal journey away from and then back to Judaism. He concluded with 12 statements that each start with, "I am a Jew because..." My favourite is: "I am a Jew because the faith of Israel demands no abdication of my mind." As a Jewish science teacher, I love that both Jewish foundational narratives and our conventional wisdom teach us to seek out wonder in the world and to examine it attentively and rationally.

Miracles and rationality are not mutually exclusive. As Albert Einstein, one of the most celebrated rational minds of our time, once said, "There are two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle."<sup>2</sup>

Through scientific habits of mind, my students uncover their eyes and look around with curiosity and openness. Science is not just how to know the world, it's how to look at it. It's how to see wonder. So tonight, don't ask your children what they learned today. Instead, ask them what miraculous thing they stopped and looked at today.

<sup>1</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in David T. Dellinger, *From Yale to Jail: The Life Story of a Moral Dissenter* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1993), p. 418.

**Daniel Abramson** is an artist, photographer, and teacher. At The Toronto Heschel School his classes include Junior High science and art.

I teach science so that my students awaken to everyday amazement.

Look  
Where  
We  
Are!

Time, Torah,  
and Technology



# Redesigning Childhood with White Space

BY JASMINE ELIAV, PHD

In the visual arts, the term “white space” describes the unpainted areas of a painting or undesigned parts of a graphic layout. White space refers to the blank areas between the figures or shapes depicted. Experts say that balancing the defined (positive) shapes with the open (negative) spaces is critical to successful design.

Jan Tschichold, the famous typographer of the 1930s, regarded white space “as an active element not a passive background.” The value of white space in art is well documented. It enhances viewer attention, improves comprehension and legibility, and balances layout.<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, sometimes the equilibrium is off. Billboards and posters sometimes cram in as much information as possible, minimizing white space and overwhelming the viewer. Also, the propensity that many artists have to load up open spaces is so common that it has its own label in design terminology: *horror vacui*. Derived from the Greek, this term references a fear of emptiness and describes the artists’ motivation to fill empty space.

Gestalt psychology looks at the “meaningful whole” and includes a concept similar to white space. Its premise is that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Moreover, seeing the whole helps us make sense and create order from the chaos that may be present in the many parts.

This past decade saw parents pulled and pushed into designing their children’s lives to maximize optimal potential. It has placed a lot of pressure on well-intentioned Moms and Dads. Parents constantly defer to parenting experts, parenting books, blogs, Facebook pages, Instagram messages, as well as to their communities and neighbourhoods as they constantly search for what exactly they should be doing. Should they send their kids to overnight camp? If they wait, what is the impact on their child? Should they enrol a four year-old in hockey? If they wait, will it impede future hockey development?

These questions help us explore what the French author Anaïs Nin suggests when she reflects, “We do not see the world as it is; we see it as we are.” Perhaps parents do not see the whole picture; perhaps they see only fragments of many different perspectives and the chaos of random expectations.

Common sense used to guide much of parenting. It has been devalued and strangely replaced by the almost devotional surrender of parental decisions to what parents feel they “should” be doing. Some external expert seems to hold authority over what’s right and what’s wrong for their particular child. Parents feel they must choose correctly or face long-term and dire consequences to their child’s well-being.

Obviously, much has been written about the value of

educational enrichment through afterschool activities, but to what end? Already feeling depleted as the day wanes, parents embrace the compulsion to take children from a long learning day to extra-curricular activities. They then rush them through dinner straight into power struggles over homework, showering, and sleeping. Whether working, staying at home, or doing a bit of both, typically parents are stressed out by to-do lists and days that never seem to end.

In my private practice, I hear parents who are displeased with themselves for yelling, and who are significantly overwrought at home from simply trying to meet the day’s expectations. No one admits exasperation. At the same time, I hear parents describe their children struggling with sleeping, eating, and doing homework. As aptly pointed out by Cathy Gulli in the January *Maclean’s* article, “The Collapse of Parenting,” parents have come into the habit of negotiating with their children, offering rewards and incentives just to get through the day.<sup>2</sup> Our new family culture engenders a negative cycle of interaction; parents and children all feel unheard, unappreciated, and devalued.

We have to pause. We have to reflect on what is driving this need to fit in and meet expectations. Why do we nurture unrealistic assumptions regarding our own capacities, unbridled zeal for our children’s capabilities, and commitment to a chaotic family lifestyle? Are we losing the message?

I suggest it’s time to take a panoramic view of how we design our lives and spend our days. It’s time to be mindful and honest about whether what we are doing is benefiting our children or taxing them. It’s time to look at the whole.

## It’s time to take a panoramic view of how we design our lives and spend our days.

Let’s add white. Let’s redesign childhood and see what white space can do for us. It may reveal whether we have balance in the layout of our lives. It will entail overcoming *horror vacui*—that fear of empty space—as we learn to appreciate white space, not as devoid of substance but as full of new interactions and restorative togetherness.

The content of white space may appear empty, especially if not viewed in context with colourful people and activities around it. In truth, white space—call it “down time”—embodies a direct communication to our children that yes, achievement is important, but not at the expense of developing the self. It is not the absence of activities, smartphones,

and technology that I am advocating; it’s the presence of mind to model ourselves as we relate to others, as we practise self-reflection.

## White space is a commitment to being available, thoughtful, and restful in our children’s presence.

Creating white space carves a place in the day where we are neither teaching, competing, instructing, nor pressuring ourselves or our children; where we are not pursuing the latest parenting fashion or activity fad. Instead, we are just living our lives, closing our day, and enjoying the weekend. White space is a commitment to being available, thoughtful, and restful in our children’s presence.

Our children will likely fight at first and the house may get messy, but in that space we model that we are not perfect and that relationships have ups and downs. Our children can reveal who they are, not who we wish them to be or whom they believe we need them to be. In fact, white space will ultimately support their activities and explorations; it will help the whole family de-stress and be together.

“White space” is critical to a child’s development as a whole person, instead of a collection of really well-honed fragments of a person. Children need this cohesion, this Gestalt. We have to talk it up and heighten the appreciation for white space across our communities and on our websites. We can wear earplugs and ignore the noise around us that clamours for activities and schedules.

Spending open, unscheduled, and uncommitted time together, we shift the family focus to socialization, and we develop the children’s sense of self. It grounds them and it grounds us, as we jointly create and treasure our white space.

1 See Barbara Marcantonio, “Design Principles—Gestalt, White Space and Perception,” *Manifesto Blog* (February 6, 2015), [manifesto.co.uk/design-principles-gestalt-white-space-perception](http://manifesto.co.uk/design-principles-gestalt-white-space-perception)

2 Cathy Gulli, “The Collapse of Parenting,” *Maclean’s*, January 18, 2016, p. 45.

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# The Sabbath

## by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

BY KAREN CHISVIN

It can be difficult for many of us to find the focus we need to meet our goals. Sharpening our focus is a continual process that requires practise over time. Staying on track and being productive is an ongoing challenge.

A spectrum of experts—from neuroscientist Daniel Levitin to Zen advocate Leo Babauta—offer us tips to help us focus: limit distractions; slow our pace; let go of the need to do everything; simplify our lives; be intentional; make a conscious commitment to focus and regularize the practice with ritual; develop habits.

These are not new ideas. Before there were academic and popular mindfulness experts, there was a way to bring our bodies, minds, and spirits into regular balance: there was (and is) the Sabbath. One very important examination of Shabbat can be found in Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's small volume, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*.

Heschel structures his book in 10 short chapters, bracketed by a prologue and an epilogue. Powerful wood engravings by artist Ilya Shor illustrate its pages. Heschel begins with the claim that people generally overlook the interrelatedness of space and time. He argues that we are “infatuated with the splendor of space, and the grandeur of things of space,” but are blind “to all reality that fails to identify itself as a thing”<sup>1</sup>—notably time.

But he looks at Judaism and finds that it is “more concerned with history than with geography.”<sup>2</sup> He presents the case that Judaism is a religion of time that aims at making time holy. Of all sanctified times, Shabbat, specifically, is likened to a “palace in time” that is made of soul, joy, and reticence.

Heschel takes care to be clear that his is a realistic appreciation of the world where we live. He reminds us that, as with many things, we learn to understand our world and to make meaning for ourselves by noticing the existence and relationship of apparent opposites. For Heschel, the value of Shabbat is not its separation from the rest of the week, but its interconnection with the rest of the week. Days one through six are important and to be valued. But they are different from the importance and value of Shabbat.

The “rest of the week” becomes associated with “technical

civilization,” which Heschel sees as the product of human labour, endowed with divine dignity. With divine dignity, it is appropriate for us to have external gifts and talents, and to make and share our outward possessions. The paradox is that at the same time, we must be able to do without those very gifts and possessions. When we abstain from work on Shabbat, we affirm the labour of the rest of the week. Shabbat is ours to observe and celebrate.

Heschel uses the middle chapters of his book to reinforce his central metaphor of the Sabbath as a palace in time. He gives us a short historical overview. The period of the Roman Empire offers contrasting perspectives on a space-based and time-based civilization. Rome at its peak represented the splendour of space. Called the Eternal City, Rome's expressions of engineering, architecture, and art were exemplified in its marvellous roads and aqueducts, grand buildings, and magnificent sculptures, all intended to be everlasting. In fact, these works of humanity proved transitory. By contrast, the Sabbath, a work of time, endures.

Heschel shows us how the rabbis of the Hellenistic/Roman period struggled to find meaning for the modern Jew of the time. First citing rabbinic sources that demonstrate the extremes of either denying the local culture or assimilating to it, Heschel describes how the rabbis found that a middle way was the correct way. They taught their students to accept and value the workaday, and then weekly celebrate the Sabbath as a “glimpse of eternity.” They could engage in study and prayer on Shabbat, and return to geometry and engineering when the Sabbath day was over.

In the final chapters of *The Sabbath*, Heschel emphasizes that Shabbat is a creation of God and not of the mind of man. It exists outside of us. Our duty and opportunity is to take it as our own and to embrace it. Heschel saw the observance of Kabbalat Shabbat as both our acceptance of the obligation to observe the day and immersion in joyous rituals to welcome its presence.

Heschel's writing style may read awkwardly to the contemporary reader. The first edition of the book was published in 1951, and it is addressed to the “modern man” of his time. Yet the book has remained in publication and continues to be

a bestseller in Jewish theology. We can update the gendered language and read “humanity” for “man.” We should recognize that “modern” is rubric for a world where engineering, science, and technology prevail.

*The Sabbath* was first published in the aftermath of the devastation of World War II and the Holocaust, and the first use of atomic weapons. Whether or not we still identify as “modern” in Heschel's sense, his argument holds. Living today in what some people call a “postmodern age,” with digital transformations, environmental degradation, and social unrest, we may still find ourselves troubled about the future.

Heschel offers a measure of hope. He is optimistic that the spiritual has a permanent place in our lives. He believes that our perpetual acknowledgment of this—through Shabbat observance—is what will allow us to continually rebuild our civilization.

Heschel's language is poetic. It is richly layered with metaphors and with a wide range of stories from the Tanach and the Talmud, and from Midrashic and Hasidic sources. While the book was also likely informed by other works of philosophy that Heschel was familiar with, those are not cited. This volume about the Sabbath restricts its citations to the works that Heschel might have read on the Sabbath. This makes the work excellent Shabbat reading for today.

Shabbat serves no instrumental purpose. The spirit of the Sabbath “is a reality we meet, rather than an empty span of time which we choose to set aside for comfort or recuperation.”<sup>3</sup> Yet, since it is “the release from our enslavement to things,” it may very well serve to support our comfort and recuperation.

Heschel urges us to covet this special time (emphatically contrasting his admonition with the tenth commandment that speaks of what we shall not covet: things of the world). Shabbat is independent of lunar and solar cycles and the change of seasons. It exists by the intent of God.

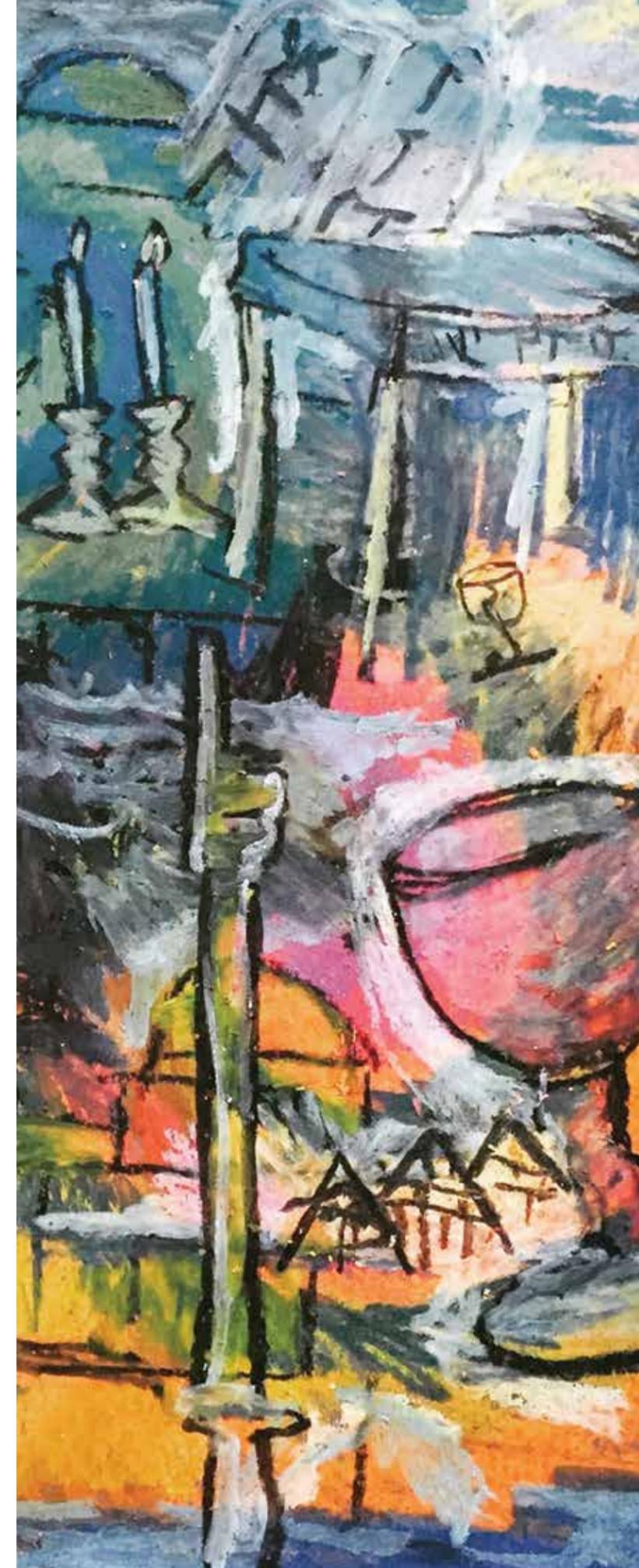
And how do we celebrate this palace of time? We make it holy for ourselves by intent and commitment. Our modern experts would do well to explore Shabbat as a means to habitually find focus. We do not just view the day from afar, but immerse ourselves in it. We mimic the original act of creation by lighting candles. We enact rituals that help us find release from daily concerns and activities. We limit our distractions, slow our pace, let go of our need to do, and concentrate on the need to be. We practise this observance by taking it up each week. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel reminds us, “The act of creation is continuous.”

1 Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), p. 5.

2 Ibid., pp. 6–7.

3 Ibid., p. 59.

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# The Shallows

MY FAVOURITE BOOK IS SO DEEP

BY IRENE S. BERKOWITZ, PHD

*The Shallows* is an astonishing story about how and why irreversible changes are transforming us, and our children, into shallower beings.

As a speaker, teacher, and writer on the impact of the digital shift, I read a lot of material. But nothing—no book, no post, no blog or vlog—has left me as breathless as Nicholas Carr's *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. Published in 2010, about a millennium ago in Internet years, its gorgeous prose and well-researched truths about the profound media transformations are with me daily. No one, especially no parent, should miss this book. I say this not just from the perspective of a professional but also with the emotional investment of a mother.

The book and its author have a great pedigree. *The Shallows* was a finalist for the 2011 Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction; it was on *The New York Times* nonfiction bestseller list; and it has been translated into 17 languages. Educated at Dartmouth and Harvard, Carr has been the executive editor of *Harvard Business Review*.

We are amidst the most thrilling shift in communications since the printing press, even if it often feels like we are drinking from a fire hose. In two decades, digital has transformed nearly all media into an electronic screen practice; just ask any two year-old. In Silicon Valley, when they say software is eating the world, they mean heads-up; the big disrupt will soon profoundly alter nearly every other aspect of life as we know it. Already in progress: banking, driving, health care....

Amidst this mediaquake, what is the importance of *The Shallows*? The book poignantly captures the importance of the Internet as the most “astonishing boon to humanity” but also observes its downside. As an interruptive technology, it makes us jumpy and unable to focus: “What the Net seems to be doing is chipping at my capacity for concentration and contemplation.”<sup>1</sup> But the book goes deeper and takes a close look at the Internet's effect on the human brain. Ultimately, *The Shallows* is an astonishing story about how and why irreversible changes are transforming us, and our children, into shallower beings by “breaking the tyranny of text,” resulting in a “dissolution of the linear mind.”

The book unfolds on four levels of increasing depth. It starts with a perfect capture of the Internet's “moveable feast of content and devices to deliver it, one course after another, each juicier than the last, with hardly a moment to catch our breath.” Next, it explores how the Internet is changing a cultural practice that is thousands of years old and that we take for granted: reading. Diving deeper, Carr presents a robust review of prestigious research on the effects of the digital on the brain. He concludes with a haunting essay on the cultural implications of the digital age.

Carr cites research, which has already confirmed that the skill of deep, immersive reading, that used to come naturally, has become a struggle, even for English majors. He tracks the fascinating history of reading back to 380 CE, when early texts, in homage to speech, had no separation between printed words. Back in that day, reading demanded intensive cognitive immersion, the opposite of today's practice. Today,

Rhodes Scholars no longer read whole books. Millennials don't read left to right; they skim and surf for key words. Noting the endurance for nearly half a millennium of the technological innovation of a long sequence of pages between two covers known as the book, Carr delivers the disturbing, yet well-researched message that connected screen reading “seizes our attention only to scatter it.” Studies confirm that the brain's comprehension declines as the number of electronic links increases, because our brains have to make a choice. To click or not to click. While reading linear text results in more remembering and better comprehension, a group reading a hypertext document were seven times more likely to report they found it confusing.

But there is no going back. Universal screen addiction is no surprise, which might be the only dated aspect of Carr's book. He reports that people spend nearly half their time away from work on screens, plus watching TV, but surely this is too low for 2016. He notes that during work, people check their emails about 40 times per hour, each glance breaking concentration and burdening working memory. Carr observes: “We like to feel connected—we hate to feel disconnected. The Internet doesn't change our intellectual habits against our will. But change them it does.”<sup>2</sup> We read faster, yet less thoroughly, and the cognitive penalty can be severe.

Carr doesn't shrink from exploring the cognitive penalty, which involves an exploration into the plasticity of the human brain, that is, the speed at which it adapts to change. Explaining a resurgence in the popularity of Canada's most famous scholar, Marshall McLuhan, who famously asserted that the “medium is the message,” Carr quotes Francis Bacon, who said, in 1620, that “moveable type changed the face and conditions of things the world over...no empire or sect or star has exercised a greater power and influence on human affairs,”<sup>3</sup> asserting that the only equally powerful inventions have been gunpowder and the compass.

Carr observes that our era may not be the first time that technology has rewired minds. In 1882, Nietzsche, suffering from depression and a writing block, purchased a typewriter, called a “writing ball.” Bingo, it cured him of both afflictions, causing him to write: “Our writing equipment takes part in the forming of our thoughts.”

Carr sums up his discussion of reading, observing:

For the last five centuries, ever since Gutenberg's printing press made book reading a popular pursuit, the linear, literary mind has been at the center of art, science and society. As supple as it is subtle, the literary mind has been the imaginative mind of the Renaissance, the rational mind of the Enlightenment, the inventive mind of the Industrial Revolution, even the subversive mind of Modernism. It may soon be yesterday's mind.<sup>4</sup>

Delving into today's mind, Carr presents a stunning array of neurobiological studies into the physiology of what is

going on. The title of the book is grounded in the proof that, as the Internet grants us easy access to vast amounts of information, it is turning us into shallower thinkers and actually changing the structure of our brains. He assesses that the Internet may be the single, most powerful mind-altering technology since the alphabet and number systems, or at the very least, since the invention of the book.

The speed of brain change is stunning. Studies show five hours on the Internet can result in the rerouting of neural pathways. As you've probably witnessed in yourself and everyone around you, neuro-adaptions lead to more of the same adaptions. First, your brain craves more practise of the new surfing skills, and second, neurological real estate for unused skills actually shrinks. Brain plasticity means new practices are quickly gained and old ones easily lost. Use it or lose it.

A study on London cabbies, long required to memorize the city, is salient. Pre-GPS, cabbies displayed enlarged hippocampi, the visual map part of the brain, correlated to years on the job. Not surprisingly, those hippocampi are shrinking. With research showing that “the brighter the software, the dimmer the user,” how long will we know our own way home, without our external GPS?

*The Shallows* concludes with deep contemplation of where this might be going. Carr asks: Are we destined to become “mindless consumers of data”? As the Internet reroutes neural paths and diminishes our capacity for contemplation, might it be altering the depth of our emotions as well as our thoughts? Similar to the dark prophecy in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Carr considers that, “as we rely on computers to mediate our understanding of the world, our own intelligence flattens into artificial intelligence.”<sup>5</sup>

*The Shallows* acknowledges that the delight of web surfing feels like “the brain lighting up.” But, like everything, it comes at a price. So, next time you find yourself wondering about your own ability to sustain focus, about your children's critical thinking skills, or whether the new generation seems somehow intellectually and emotionally, maybe even fundamentally, different, one-click your Kindle app and download *The Shallows*. You'll be in for a beautifully written, deep reading experience.

And if your brain craves more, Carr's latest book, *The Glass Cage*, is a wonderful and disturbing study of the impact of automation.

1 Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), p. 10.

2 Ibid., p. 92.

3 Ibid., p. 69.

4 Ibid., p. 10.

5 Ibid., p. 224.

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