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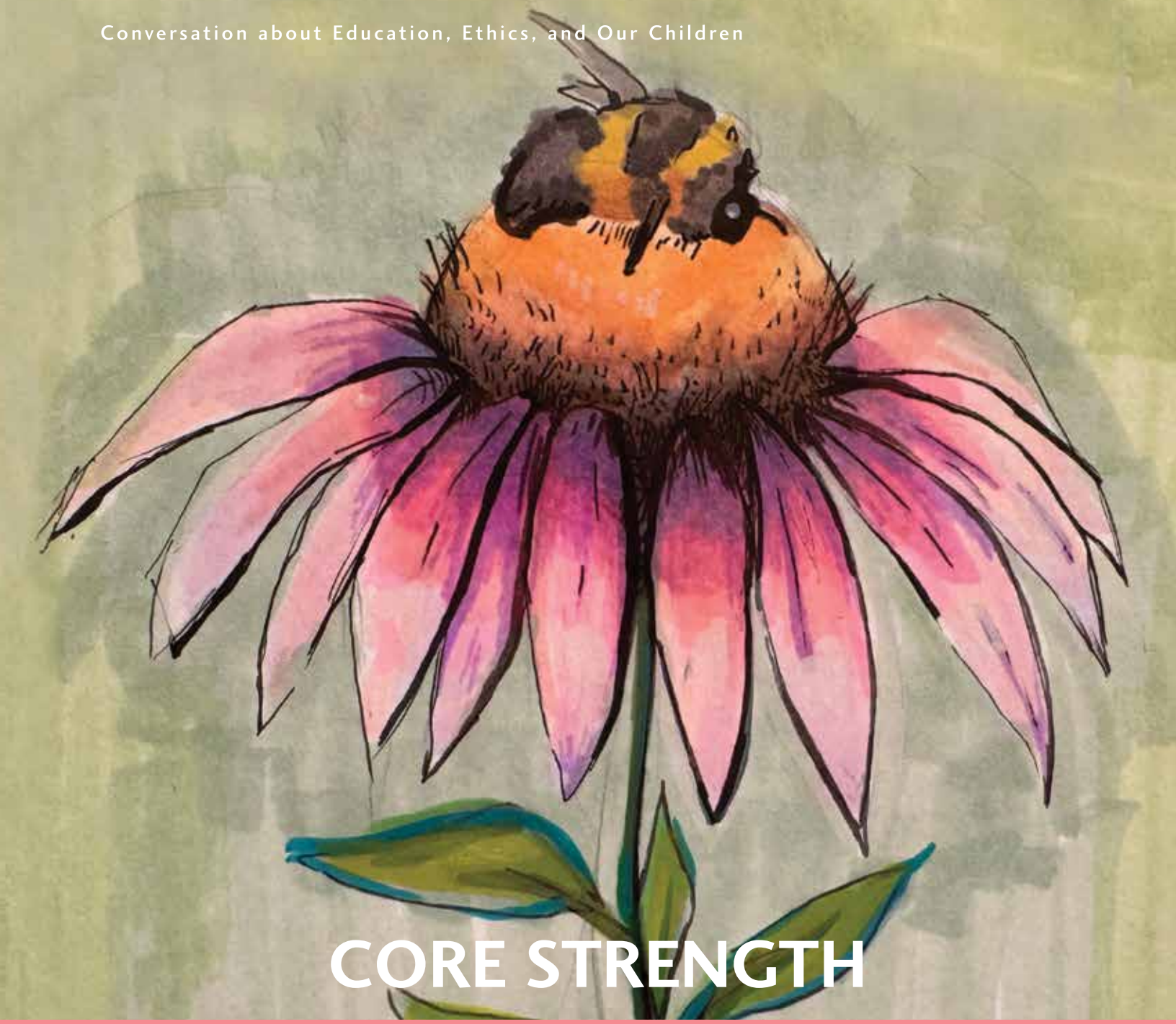
THINK

THE LOLA STEIN INSTITUTE JOURNAL

Conversation about Education, Ethics, and Our Children



CORE STRENGTH

JEWISH EDUCATION MEETS ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE / BEING ISRAEL
A SOULFUL SCHOOL LEADER AND THE SOUL OF A SCHOOL / UNPLUGGED EDUCATION
EARLY LITERACY AND BUDDING IDENTITY / NEW CO-CHAIRS WITH EYES ON HESCHEL
RABBI JOE KANOFSKY ASKS WHY READ? / RABBI YAEL SPLANSKY ON SYNAGOGUE NOW

THINK THE LOLA STEIN INSTITUTE JOURNAL

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Greg Beiles
Tziporah Cohen
Dvora Goodman
Alan Rusonik

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COPYEDITING & PROOFREADING
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DESIGN & LAYOUT
Sharon Kish / www.sharonkish.com

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LSI PUBLICATIONS

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.

COLUMNS

CORE STRENGTH

OUR SAGES TELL US

Cultivating a Child's Inner Strength

In 1978, Herbert A. Simon won the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences. He had been very busy very early infusing psychology into economics. He studied decision-making and, when computers took off, he wrote, "What information consumes is...the attention of its recipients."[1] Living, as our children do, in the Information Age, this is a very serious matter.

An attention economy means that our children's focus in daily life is the primary commodity of their times. It is their core resource and it can be bought, sold, manipulated, and stolen. Just as citizens in the Agrarian Age protected their crops and in the Industrial Age their gold and minerals, our children will have to protect and conserve their attention. It will be key to their productivity, safety, and peace. Our job as parents and caregivers is to prepare them for this road. We do not want them to grow up wielding or relying on a store of information that is substandard or counterfeit.

Our children will have to protect and conserve their attention. It will be key to their productivity, safety, and peace.

There are many strategies to focus attention in life. At THINK, we look to Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel whose focus divides in three directions: (1) that radical amazement enlivens awe, wonder, and humility; (2) that the Sabbath elevates sacred moments and holistic well-being; and (3) that the study of ancient Jewish text activates social responsibility. Regrettably, keeping hold of these is not simple. They require strength and intention across the fast flow of challenge. Stepping stones can help our children wade through the distraction: let's set them up in a way that serves their long-term interests.

First, to understand what is in front of them at any given moment, children must pay attention with their whole soul. Artist and philosopher, Jenny Odell writes, "If our culture didn't privilege snap judgments, immediately grasping or discarding what's in front of us, we wouldn't need a practice like deep listening. But we do."[2]

In "deep listening," the listener pays attention to what the speaker says but also to how they, the listener, feels about and responds to the information being given: full context in full focus. Jenny Odell "listens" to the whole of the forest to appreciate what there is to know about birdsong.

In the attention economy great efforts are made to manufacture likeability and addictiveness and it's very hard to know if what is dressed up to look good is good. So how do we teach children the market principle of *caveat emptor*, i.e., buyer beware?

The answer is that maturity and practice can help children with thoughtful response, and over time a child can learn to think critically. For example, she can learn to remember that the screen display she is viewing was staged by an unknown someone whose opinions and designs affect its truth; equally, a child can get comfortable with how emotion can cloud judgment and then factor for such subjectivity in different moments; while a third can take note that a delivery seems sketchy or doubtful and so choose to investigate.

The capability for children to deflect passive receipt of what comes at them, whether through a screen or from life itself, is an urgent goal of our times. The most effective way for students to develop this nuanced headspace is to immerse daily from a young age in agency, curiosity, and discovery.

Students can develop second-nature level skills in how to digest and manage the many kinds of communication they receive when their school uses the arts as a tool to enhance learning across all academic disciplines. Nuances abound in personal and societal interactions of all kinds and the ability to pay close attention implies mastery of a significant learning curve.

Students who work through various modes of expression—literary, dramatic, artistic—are training themselves to differentiate between what is central and what is tangential, what is meaningful and what is window dressing. Drama involves leading and supporting characters: How does presentation connect to meaning? Visual works speak through colour and composition: Does the design boost or confuse the message? Literature conjures new horizons, some are silly, some profound. Music deals with theme, rhythm, and harmony. Deep listening. Deep learning.

Back in the forest with Jenny Odell, the roots and trunk of each tree are highly significant. Deep listening is personal, individualistic at its core. In this issue of THINK our contributors attend to core strength.

Greg Beiles identifies the Jewish wisdom tradition as a source code for managing education amidst the lure of artificial intelligence. Alan Rusonik cherishes soulfulness and pluralism and finds both in reflection and prayer. Dvora Goodman places Israel at the heart of Jewishness and suggests ways to share its fusion of spirit, culture, and strength with Jewish children today.

Eleanor Barak sees Hebrew as core to Jewish identity and presents how her very young students generate literacy and identity at the same time. Josh Winestock shines light on the vantage point that math fundamentals offer both for higher mathematical thinking and real world situations. Talya Metz exposes the essential challenges in educational methods in 2025.

In the attention economy, how we study, what we study, where we study, all matter. In the footsteps of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, the Toronto Heschel School's new co-chairs, Michelle Shavim and Matt Stein, locate students' spiritual strength at the centre of their Jewish education. Rabbi Yael Splansky finds synagogues to be a natural second home for the complex identity that combines Jewish individuality and Jewish community. Rabbi Joe Kanofsky reflects on what reading does for each of us as human beings and for our shared humanity. Gail Baker and Tziporah Cohen offer a curated selection of books to enthrall, inspire, and engage young readers.

Let's pay close attention and let's direct our attention to core strength.

Pam

1 Hebert A. Simon, "Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World," in Martin Greenberger, ed., *Computers, Communications, and the Public Interest* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), p. 40.

2 Jenny Odell, "Deep Listening," First Impressions, January 1, 2025, https://www.amherst.edu/news/magazine/issues/2025-winter/first-impressions.

In the willow maze at the Toronto Heschel School, the "thinking rock" waits for thinkers.

Jewish Education in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

BY GREG BEILES

Conversation about education has a new centre of gravity: artificial intelligence (AI). Writing about the power of technology, even in 1951, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel observed that "nothing is more useful, nothing more frightening."[1]

At the core of AI are computer processors; this is explicit even in how some are named: "icore-7," "icore-9." What lies at the core of Jewish learning? Two things: Jewish teachings and Jewish teachers.

At the core of Jewish teachings any distinction between the so-called secular and so-called religious dissolves. Math, science, literacy, art, music—the classical disciplines of study—empower our students to engage with one another and make meaningful contributions to the world (*tikkun olam*). Traditional Jewish religious texts, language, and literature elevate this learning, as Rabbi Heschel has noted, "convey[ing]…a sense for the marvel and mystery of being alive."[2]

For healthy brain development, children need concrete, three-dimensional, movement-based learning activities.

Jonathan Sacks writes:

> In Judaism, "secular" wisdom—the sciences and humanities—is not secular at all. It has religious dignity. It helps us see the universe as God's work and the human person as God's image... The God who speaks to us through Torah is the God whose wisdom we discover through quantum physics and the structure of the genome.[3]

The time-tested teachings of the Jewish canon are a treasury of wisdom refracted through thousands of years of human experience. "Turn it over, and [again] turn it over, for all is therein" (Pirkei Avot 5:22). How can you be an educated Jew, asks Rabbi Sacks, without "familiarity with Tanakh and Talmud, the classic Torah commentaries, the poetry of Judah HaLevi, the philosophy of Maimonides, and the history of the Jewish people?"[4] I add the Siddur and Hebrew-language proficiency, which are the keys to accessing the above.

Jewish thinkers throughout the ages have explored and embraced all ways that the human heart and mind use to find meaning, make connections, search for answers, and reverberate with a sense of awe and wonder. "Humankind will not perish for want of information," writes Heschel, "but only for want of appreciation."[5]

As inheritors of this integrative tradition, Jewish educators appreciate how science fascinates students with the complexity of creation; how math reveals the astounding affinity between patterns in nature and numbers; how literature opens students to the fragility of the human soul; and how history class invites students to contemplate God's role in the human drama.

Now, as in a whirlwind, the conundrum that calculators once posed to a generation of arithmetic teachers is amplified tenfold by AI in all of the disciplines of classic learning.

AI optimists see its potential to adapt methods of instruction to each child's preferred way of learning, answering all their questions *instantly* and *patiently*. Concerns that such customized adaptation will deprive children of the necessary cognitive "friction" are answered by reference to the availability of an algorithm that calibrates the instruction to the specific amount of challenge that is "right" for each child—like setting the resistance dial on my exercise bike for my fitness level today. AI-for-education optimists see it as the ultimate "child-centred" education, one that proponents of the child-centred approach never could have imagined nor likely condoned.

On the other hand, AI-for-education skeptics have serious concerns. For healthy brain development, children need concrete, three-dimensional, movement-based learning activities. Maturing cerebral matter craves the mental exertion that classic learning tasks demand: students learn to organize thoughts, craft an argument, and polish expression by writing their own essays; they learn reasoning as they work through mathematical problems themselves; they come to understand the workings of nature through the example of science experiments that are hands-on; and they learn to digest others' thoughts and the beauty that is available to them as they struggle to interpret and appreciate texts, be they poetic, literary, journalistic, or biblical. In the puzzle posed by education infused with AI, the missing piece remains how to train this generation of children in productive thinking, if the "step by step" cognitive tasks that have been proven to be required to hone intelligence are washed away by the tsunami of AI.

In schools today where students are already bypassing these components of learning, teachers have given up altogether on assessing long-form, language-rich assignments such as essays and lab reports; they have reverted to using outdated standardized multiple-choice and memorization tests. This is a step backwards in critical thinking education. How to pre-empt these pitfalls is perplexing.

Jewish tradition emboldens us to resist the pull of "inevitalism" and remember that we can decide for ourselves whether and when to use AI. Free will includes the capacity to say "No." We should distinguish between what we choose to do and what we choose not to do. Rabbi Heschel points out that a "sense of dignity grows with the ability to say no to oneself."[6] It builds boundaries and self-regulation.

Jewish monotheism grew from the rejection of "false gods." In the famous *midrash* story (Genesis Rabbah 38:13), Avraham smashes the idols to which all his peers were attributing consciousness—call it "intelligence." The latest test of this ancient discipline is to summon our free will in the face of AI's remarkable capability to mimic consciousness.

AI may look like the ultimate "child-centred" tutor. In truth, it's an impersonator. Since the Torah was handed down at Sinai, Jewish scholars have known that for students to absorb an idea, "the transfer itself must be a significant happening."[7] Effective communication of an idea happens only when a teacher conveys the teaching through personal conviction and commitment.

Rabbi Heschel writes, "To guide a pupil into the Promised Land, the teacher must have been there themselves. When asking themselves: Do I stand for what I teach? Do I believe what I say? the teacher must be able to answer in the affirmative."[8] Only deep calls to deep. Jewish learning is person-to-person. "For an idea to happen, the teacher must relive its significance, he must become one with what he says."[9]

Only a human can be such a teacher because only a human being can make the journey to the Promised Land—whether this particular trek pursues a math dilemma, looks for historical understanding, or relates to something more spiritual. No matter how adroit or adaptive a computer algorithm may be, an AI tutor cannot embody the humanity of Ya'akov becoming Yisrael through his struggle with God, nor the subjectivity of Ruth's choice to follow her mother-in-law Naomi to join the Jewish people. No AI tutor can serve as a *chaveruta* partner (study partner) whose insights and suggestions are informed by personal life experience and struggles, or the deepest longings of the soul.

The journey through education entails navigation, struggle, self-doubt, and renewed commitment. As a new learner, each student begins like a stranger in a strange land; with a soulful teacher, the student becomes a whole person, one whose free will engages in discovery, resourcefulness, and *tikkun olam*.

1 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1951), p. 3.

2 Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Idols of the Temple," in *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1954), p. 60.

3 Jonathan Sacks, "Future Tense: Unwritten Chapter," Rabbi Sacks Library, March 1, 2008, https://rabbisacks.org/archive/future-tense-unwritten-chapter/.

4 Jonathan Sacks, "Letter 4: Jewish Education," in *Letters to the Next Generation: Reflections for Yom Kippur* (London: Office of the Chief Rabbis, 2009), p. 17.

5 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1955), p. 46.

6 "Carl Stern's Interview with Dr. Heschel," in Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), p. 369.

7 Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Spirit of Jewish Education," *Jewish Education*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (1953), pp. 9–62, https://doi.org/10.1080/0021642530240202, which is based on the address delivered at the Pedagogic Conference of the Jewish Education Committee of New York City, February 15, 1953.

8 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *I Asked for Wonder: A Spiritual Anthology* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983), p. 62.

9 Heschel, "Idols of the Temple," p. 55.

Dr. Greg Beiles is the President of The Lola Stein Institute and served as Head of School at The Toronto Heschel School from 2014 to 2024.

Finding Strength Together

THE POWER OF *TEFILLAH* AT THE TORONTO HESCHEL SCHOOL

BY ALAN RUSONIK

As Head of School, I wear many hats and have countless responsibilities. But for me, two daily practices are non-negotiable: the first is greeting our students as they arrive each morning; the second is joining our students in the various *tefillot* and *minyanim* (prayers and the groups of 10 required for certain prayers) that we offer at our school. These moments are not simply routines; they are the heartbeat of our school day and the foundation of our school community. They symbolize our welcome to each child and our commitment to their spiritual growth.

Our approach to *teffilah* at Heschel is near the top of the many things that attracted me to this school, and, therefore, I am more than pleased to write about the power of *tefillah* at The Toronto Heschel School.

Why is *tefillah* important to me?

For me, *tefillah* is a pause in the hectic pace of my day and schedule; it is a sacred time to reflect, give thanks, and set my intentions. It reminds me to stay humble and grateful, to acknowledge the blessings and challenges that shape my leadership, and to remain connected to something far greater than my to-do list. *Tefillah* is also how I connect with my Jewish past. When I recite the same words my ancestors spoke for generations, I feel part of an unbroken chain. Participating in *tefillah* as part of a *minyan* links me to my Jewish community; standing together, our voices joined, deepens my sense of belonging and shared purpose. And above all, *tefillah* connects me to Hashem. Through *tefillah*, I can express gratitude, ask for guidance, and remember that I am never alone in my thoughts and hopes.

Why is *tefillah* important at The Toronto Heschel School?

At Heschel, *tefillah* is not just an obligation. It is a daily practice that binds us together as a community of learners and compassionate thinking human beings. It reinforces that we are part of an ancient and living tradition. Through *tefillah*, students absorb the language and rhythms of our people, but more than that, they learn to pause, reflect, and find their own voice in conversation with Hashem. In an age that pulls us in many directions, *tefillah* draws us back to our values, our roots, and to each other. As Rabbi Heschel taught us:

> Prayer is not a stratagem for occasional use, a refuge to resort to now and then. It is rather like an established residence for the innermost self. All things have a home: the bird has a nest, the fox has a hole, the bee has a hive. A soul without prayer is a soul without a home.[1]

What do I find in *tefillah* that centres me?

In *tefillah*, I find perspective and grounding; it recentres me so I can serve our students, teachers, and families with greater clarity and purpose. It offers me a stillness that is rare amid the hustle and bustle of school life, a moment to appreciate and contemplate my hopes, worries, and responsibilities. *Tefillah* reminds me that I belong to a story much larger than myself, one that stretches back through generations and forward into the future. This perspective keeps me humble and grounded, and reminds me that my work each day is both meaningful now and part of something enduring.

How does *tefillah b'Tzibur* give me strength?

At The Toronto Heschel School, we have various *tefillot*, depending on the day and the occasion. Each of our three school divisions—Early Years, Elementary, and Junior High—has a *Tefillah b'Tzibur* once a week, a communal gathering, which we affectionately call "TBT." There is something uniquely powerful about standing together as a community, our voices rising and falling in shared words and songs. *Tefillah* with our students, teachers, and staff strengthens my sense of attachment and commitment. It reminds me that none of us carries our burdens alone. In our TBT, we manifest holding each other up; we celebrate together; sometimes we cry together; and always we hope together. In our collective voice, I find courage, renewal, and an ever-deepening bond of belonging.

There is something uniquely powerful about standing together as a community, our voices rising and falling in shared words and songs.

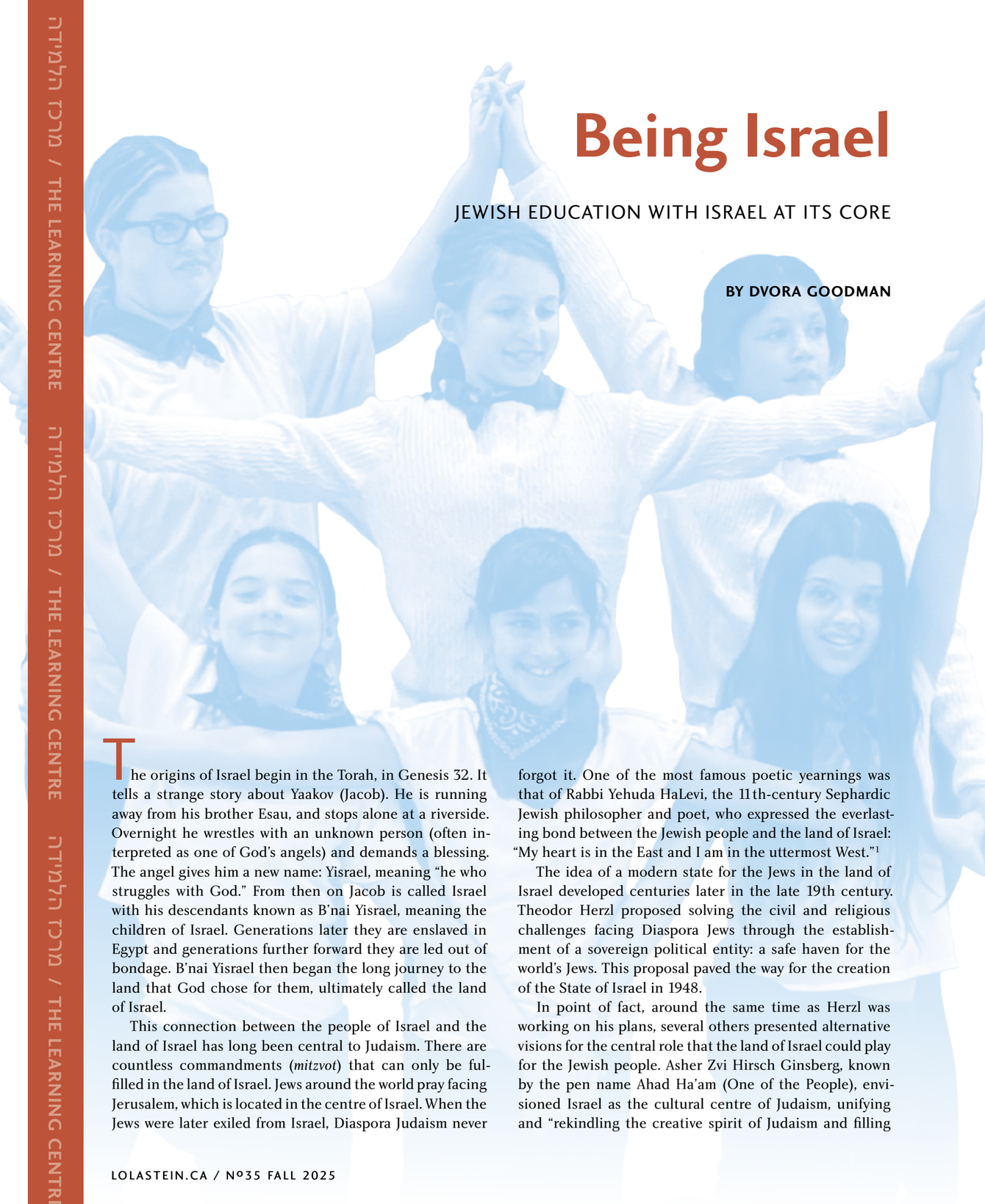
Our Junior High students engage in a variety of tefillot throughout the week. One is *Tefillah B'Kavanah* (prayer with intention) where they rotate through different *minyanim* such as yoga, drama, mindfulness, and song, and explore distinct perspectives on *tefillah*. In another weekly practice, Junior High students animate our school's core commitment to Jewish pluralism: in *Tefillah B'Kehillah* (prayer in the community), they experience how different denominations within Judaism engage in *tefillah*.

I once worked at a Jewish day school outside Toronto which also described itself as pluralistic, but its approach towards pluralism looked very different. At that school, students chose to attend a *minyan* aligned with a particular denomination at the start of the year and remained there all year long. In contrast, at Heschel, we believe it is essential for our students to experience the richness and diversity of all Jewish traditions. By rotating through various *minyanim*, our students gain a deeper understanding of the breadth of Jewish practice and become better prepared to find their own meaningful place within it.

Participating in daily *tefillah* with our students reminds me why I chose the path of Jewish education in the first place. It is my privilege and my joy to participate each day grounded in gratitude, guided by tradition, and uplifted by the voices of our students, the heart of The Toronto Heschel School.

1 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), p. 258.

Alan Rusonik is Head of School at The Toronto Heschel School.



Being Israel

JEWISH EDUCATION WITH ISRAEL AT ITS CORE

BY DVORA GOODMAN

The origins of Israel begin in the Torah, in Genesis 32. It tells a strange story about Yaakov (Jacob). He is running away from his brother Esau, and stops alone at a riverside. Overnight he wrestles with an unknown person (often interpreted as one of God's angels) and demands a blessing. The angel gives him a new name: Yisrael, meaning "he who struggles with God." From then on Jacob is called Israel with his descendants known as B'nai Yisrael, meaning the children of Israel. Generations later they are enslaved in Egypt and generations further forward they are led out of bondage. B'nai Yisrael then began the long journey to the land that God chose for them, ultimately called the land of Israel.

This connection between the people of Israel and the land of Israel has long been central to Judaism. There are countless commandments (*mitzvot*) that can only be fulfilled in the land of Israel. Jews around the world pray facing Jerusalem, which is located in the centre of Israel. When the Jews were later exiled from Israel, Diaspora Judaism never forgot it. One of the most famous poetic yearnings was that of Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi, the 11th-century Sephardic Jewish philosopher and poet, who expressed the everlasting bond between the Jewish people and the land of Israel: "My heart is in the East and I am in the uttermost West."[1]

The idea of a modern state for the Jews in the land of Israel developed centuries later in the late 19th century. Theodor Herzl proposed solving the civil and religious challenges facing Diaspora Jews through the establishment of a sovereign political entity: a safe haven for the world's Jews. This proposal paved the way for the creation of the State of Israel in 1948.

In point of fact, around the same time as Herzl was working on his plans, several others presented alternative visions for the central role that the land of Israel could play for the Jewish people. Asher Zvi Hirsch Ginsberg, known by the pen name Ahad Ha'am (One of the People), envisioned Israel as the cultural centre of Judaism, unifying and "rekindling the creative spirit of Judaism and filling the hearts of Jews everywhere with love and pride."[2] In 1897 he wrote in "The Jewish State and the Jewish Problem":

> This Jewish settlement will become in the course of time the center of the nation, wherein its spirit will find pure expression and develop in all its aspects to the highest degree of perfection of which it is capable. Then, from this center, the spirit of Judaism will radiate to the great circumference, to all the communities of the Diaspora, to inspire them with new life and to preserve the overall unity of our people.[3]

Today we are blessed to see both visions come alive: a sovereign State of Israel that is also a place of Jewish renewal and spirituality.

This happy evolution poses a new challenge for Jewish educators in the Jewish Diaspora who must now concretize and animate a dynamic and heartfelt role for Israel in Jewish lives. Ongoing generations of Jewish children need to understand Israel as integral to their Jewish identities, even if they do not live there. Three educational approaches, when taken together, are showing promise in realizing this aspiration.

Remember that the Hebrew language is key

Despite the challenges of teaching a second language, a strong Jewish education must have a foundation of Hebrew language. Speaking Hebrew may not be important in and of itself, but as a connection to Jewish culture, tradition, and people, it is invaluable. Modern Hebrew still holds traceable features of its biblical roots. These little linguistic traits transmit millennia of insights into Jewish spirit and culture. They are junctures and gateways that open doors to Judaism, Jewish history, and Jewish peoplehood, both ancient and modern.

For instance, two names for insects are great examples. The Hebrew word for ladybug is *Parat Moshe Rabeinu*, "Moses' cow." In English, "the lady" refers to Mary, and so the Jews chose their own prominent religious figure: Moshe. Another biblical reference is the Hebrew for the praying mantis, *Gamal Shlomo*, "Solomon's camel." This name came through a folktale about King Solomon turning a camel into an insect. Also stories come through the little red flowers that grow on the Judaean Hills and are known as *Dam Maccabi*, "the blood of the Maccabis." The name recalls a legend of the Maccabean revolt, that any time a Maccabi warrior was killed, a flower sprang up and bloomed. One last example is the Hebrew word *tikvah*, hope for the future. This word comes from the same root as the word for *mikveh mayim*, the Jewish ritual bath, interconnecting water as a purifying source of life and also a way to purify the soul through hope. Hebrew language is key, both to speaking with Jews around the world and to unlocking Jewish tradition itself.

Israel is integrated into all aspects of learning

Many Jewish schools separate Jewish learning from general studies and their students lose the opportunity to meld general knowledge with their Jewish experience. Integrated learning enables children to understand that Jewishness and the Israel connection are simply a natural part of who they are holistically speaking. Jewish identity becomes more than a programmed activity relegated to certain times or subject matter. The character, spirit, and longevity of ideas underlying foundational notions of tribe, homeland, and diaspora flow throughout the school experience and deepen in sophistication as the children mature. Children begin to look at the world through a Jewish lens. Seeing our connection to Israel through this lens is who we are as Jews.

There are authentic opportunities to get to know Israel and Israelis

In Diaspora Jewish education, Israeli teachers have long been core to the educators who bring Israel into the classroom. This has primarily worked through Hebrew language; however, I believe that the opportunity is deeper than that: Israeli teachers bring in authentic Israel. They bring stories from their own childhood, family histories, Israeli culture, and they have bridges that connect to people who still live there. Yet my experience shows me that Israel should not only be taught by Israelis; it gives the incorrect message that only those born in Israel can offer the authentic connection. Israel education needs to be a true partnership between Israelis and others. Just as Judaism can be taught by everyone, so too Israel.

The other part of authentic opportunities is to give children the chance to visit Israel themselves. Children need to see for themselves that Israel is a real country. They need to experience the Israel of the Torah and the Israel of today. They will feel welcome in Israel and will understand how it is part of their Judaism and Jewish experience.

"Being Israel" means connecting to the land, the modern state, and the Jewish people. I believe that Jewish education at its best understands the centrality of these three aspects of Judaism and orients the learning experience around them.

1 Yehuda HaLevi, "Texts Concerning Zionism: My Heart Is in the East" (c. 1141), accessed July 14, 2025, https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/quot-my-heart-is-in-the-east-quot-yehuda-halevi.

2 Hans Kohn, "Ahad Ha'am: Nationalist with a Difference: A Zionism to Fulfill Judaism," *Commentary*, June 1951, https://www.commentary.org/articles/hans-kohn/ahad-haam-nationalist-with-a-differencea-zionism-to-fulfill-judaism/.

3 Ahad Ha'am, "The Jewish State and the Jewish Problem (1897)," in Gil Troy, *The Zionist Ideas: Visions for the Jewish Homeland—Then, Now, Tomorrow* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, and Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2018), p. 111.

Dvora Goodman is Coordinator of The Lola Stein Institute. She works as an educational consultant in a variety of settings.

“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.”

AJ Heschel,
Man Is Not Alone

Math Fundamentals in the Classroom and Beyond

BY JOSH WINESTOCK

On a sunny morning, a Grade 7 student stands under the willow tree, looking up in awe at its immeasurable height. On the ground, she places a metre stick to record the length of the tree's shadow.

Nearby, another student crouches over a cardboard box containing a 1-litre cup of water. He's busy calculating the box's surface area and volume using measurements taken with a ruler. The student wonders what the ideal ratio of the two measurements would be to maximize the rate of temperature change in his soon-to-be solar heater.

When planning instruction throughout a math course, educators regularly group lessons into units categorized by math strands. These strands encompass broad mathematical areas, each with its own set of skills, concepts, and Big Ideas. These categories are generally agreed upon across the math-teaching world and include some of these core concept areas: numbers and operations, algebra and patterns, geometry, measurement, and data and probability. Organizing math instruction by these strands provides a valuable framework that can help students and teachers conceptualize the subject, ensuring that teachers cover the discipline's diverse landscape and group similar concepts appropriately.

However, as students build their skills unit by unit, a more significant shift in their mathematical development is occurring beneath the surface. While, day-to-day, students learn to master strand-specific concepts, such as fractions or angle measurements, these subtopics are catalysts that inspire more foundational leaps in mathematical thinking. These leaps are cultivated through mathematics instruction across grades and strands, developing students into holistically competent mathematicians.

In my Grade 7 math class, students are introduced to the 6th-century BCE Greek philosopher Thales of Miletus. Among his many accomplishments and contributions across various disciplines, he is historically recognized for promoting a deductive approach to science and mathematics and for being a pioneer in applying mathematical concepts to solve real-world problems. The Grade 7 students explore Thales' method for determining the height of an object that cannot be easily measured by hand (perhaps the height of a tall tree). To solve for the unknown height, Thales visualized a right triangle with a base equal to the length of the object's shadow and a height matching the object's height. By comparing these measurements to the height and shadow of a known object (such as a person's shadow and height) at the same time of day, he could calculate the unknown height using the following principle:

$$\frac{\text{height of object 1}}{\text{length of shadow 1}} = \frac{\text{height of object 2}}{\text{length of shadow 2}}$$

This principle states that, at a given time of day, comparing the height of any nearby objects with the length of their respective shadows reveals the same multiplicative relationship. If the shadow of one tree is half the length of the tree's height, then the shadows of all trees nearby will be half their height—each comparison is proportional! By observing this phenomenon with different objects, students deepen their new understanding of the proportionality of similar triangles to proportional relationships in the school's backyard.

By working through this mathematical situation, students draw upon their understandings from multiple strands: geometry and spatial sense (recognizing and evaluating similar triangles), number sense (representing the scenario as fractions or ratios), algebra (solving for the unknown height using algebraic techniques), and, of course, measurement!

This type of thinking, in which students compare multiple quantities simultaneously and consider whether they maintain a relationship based on multiplication, is at the heart of *proportional reasoning*. Developing students' capacity in proportional reasoning is one of the core understandings at the centre of mathematical learning in middle school. Thales' method for calculating immeasurable heights is just one example of the numerous applications of this proportional thinking. In math, we describe proportional relationships through many concepts, including similar triangles, equivalent fractions, percentages, ratios, and rates. Outside the classroom, proportional relationships are applied in everything from cooking to taxes to architectural design.

Proportional relationships apply to cooking, taxes, and architectural design.

An integrated teaching model such as the one used at The Toronto Heschel School helps students synthesize their understanding of concepts across disciplines. In math, this benefit often comes from concretizing their experience in context by applying it in other venues. In the vignette above, the Heschel students explore the implications of ratio for heat transfer. In the visual arts, students utilize the proportionality of similar triangles to artistic effect, just as Kandinsky once did.

But perhaps more importantly, this integrated approach recognizes and honours the transcendent nature of these core ideas. While proportional reasoning may be rooted in and codified in mathematics, the concept is far-reaching and relevant across disciplines. For instance, students can consider the proportion of colour when mixing paint; the meaning of proportionality in civic voting systems; and even the implications of proportionality when deliberating over ethical concepts such as *middah k'neged middah*: every action deserves a response.

It is important for math educators to look beyond the strands and be attuned to the key understandings of proportional reasoning, pattern recognition, and representation and modelling that traverse and underpin the traditional strands. With this awareness, math educators can better plan instruction that gets to the core of mathematical thinking and prepares students for using math flexibly and with understanding.

Josh Winestock teaches math and music at The Toronto Heschel School.

“Good Morning, Malka!”

HEBREW AS A BRIDGE TO JEWISH IDENTITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

These simple words in Hebrew create an emotional connection, provide a sense of visibility, and invite Malka to feel she belongs.

BY ELINOR BARAK

“Good morning, Malka!” I say in Hebrew with a warm smile when I meet my young student. I bend down to her eye level, look at her and say, “What a beautiful dress you’re wearing today! Look at all the rainbow colours embroidered on it.” Malka gives a shy smile and hurries to place her name on the “Who’s in class?” board.

These simple words in Hebrew are much more than a compliment. They create an emotional connection, provide a sense of visibility, and invite Malka to feel she belongs. This moment reminds me of the essence of my mission: not just to teach a language, but to offer it to children as a tool for building connection, confidence, and meaning.

Shlomo enters, and I greet him: “Good morning!”

He replies: “Good morning, Morah Elinor.”

I ask how he feels, and he says: “I’m happy.”

I smile at him and say: “Kol hakavod, Shlomo, I’m very happy you’re speaking Hebrew”—and hug him appreciatively.

When I hear a child speak Hebrew, my heart expands. I feel that I’m not just teaching, but opening a gateway to a world of identity, belonging, and culture.

I believe that when language is accompanied by a warm emotional connection, children develop a positive attitude towards it. To them, Hebrew is not just a tool—it’s a warm, embracing language that provides security and a sense of belonging.

As an early childhood educator, I see daily how Hebrew meets the children—not just as a functional language, but as a rich world of culture, tradition, and identity.

One day, after singing “Ma Nishtana” in preparation for Passover, one child said to me: “My dad knows that song too.” In that moment, I was reminded again of the power of language: it’s a living bridge to home, roots, and past generations.

Teaching Hebrew in early childhood, for me, is sowing identity. At an age when personality is taking shape, language creates deep connections to tradition, to values, and to a sense of communal belonging.

I see how children are drawn into the language through songs, stories, movement, and imagination. When we sing “Ma Nishtana” or “Sevivon Sov Sov Sov,” it’s not just a musical activity, it’s also a ritual that connects the children to their cultural roots.

Researcher Joshua Fishman reminds us of the central role of language in the development and preservation of culture, especially among minority groups: “The road to societal death is paved by language activity that is not focused on intergenerational continuity.”[1]

That is, if children don’t acquire the language, use it, and feel at home in it—it doesn’t matter how much we teach or celebrate traditions—identity will fade.

Precisely in early childhood, when language is absorbed as part of the experience, we have a chance to preserve and pass on identity. My role is to connect children through the use of Hebrew not just to words, but to blessings, customs, and Jewish stories. When a child learns to say “Modeh Ani,” “Shabbat Shalom,” or “Todah,” they also absorb the deep values behind the words.

I’m offering the language to the hearts of children.

We see the results on the ground: when children speak Hebrew daily, sing songs, recite blessings, play in Hebrew, hear stories, and become familiar with traditional symbols, they are not just learning a language, they are living it. The emotional experience of early childhood learning is embedded in them and influences their identity formation, resonating throughout their lives.

Inspired by the developmental approach of Lev Vygotsky, I understand that learning occurs within a socio-cultural context. The significant adult is the bridge between the language and the child’s world. When Hebrew is accompanied by emotion, by a story, a song, or a hug, it becomes ingrained in the child as part of their identity. It is no longer an external object; it becomes an internal tool for thinking, understanding the world, and belonging. Vygotsky’s concept of the “Zone of Proximal Development” describes the space in which the child needs guidance in order to grow.[2]

There, within that space, I meet the children—not just as a teacher, but as a partner in their journey. And when Hebrew is the main tool, this encounter becomes an identity-building experience.

I make sure to create a living Hebrew environment: the letters, signs, names, books, and songs are all in Hebrew. Every detail in the learning space tells a story, inviting the child to experience the language as a natural part of their environment and to be an active participant in it. Hebrew is not a “language that’s taught,” it is part of the child’s natural space.

The family also plays an important role. In our class, each child receives a personal “song booklet” with songs learned in preschool, both in Hebrew and English. The booklet is sent home and becomes a bridge between school and home. When children sing holiday songs at home and use Hebrew words learned in class, a link is created between school and home, and Hebrew gains a place in family life.

One of my favourite ways to integrate Hebrew is through a multi-sensory experience. When I teach new words, I don’t rely only on pictures or explanations. The children hear the word, see it visually, and experience it physically, making the learning emotional and meaningful. Some concepts become part of everyday speech and gain deeper meaning. For example, the word “shofar” is taught not only in the context of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur but also as part of a tool we create and use in class: “The Sound Wheel.” The Sound Wheel is a visual tool that helps children differentiate between various voice levels and match their use to social situations. The children learn to recognize:

Inner Voice: when we “speak in our hearts” and no sound is heard

Chana Voice: a very soft voice, almost a whisper, like the way Chanah in the Bible prayed for a child

Chaveruta Voice: a quiet voice, just enough for a friend sitting close by to hear

Conversation Voice: medium volume, suitable for group discussions

Shofar Voice: a strong and confident voice, suitable for public speaking

The concept of “Shofar Voice” is present in our daily class conversations, and children learn the word “shofar” in a broader context—not only as a musical instrument but also as an expression of strength, presence, and confidence. Using these different Hebrew terms shows children that language also speaks through sound and sometimes through its absence, like the inner voice.

When one of the children sings with a Shofar Voice in the circle, I praise them: “Beautiful! I can hear the words in your Shofar Voice, and it warms my heart!” By doing so, the concept becomes emotionally meaningful, tied to success and a deeper connection to the language.

Not long ago, I overheard a child in the drama corner say to their doll: “Shabbat Shalom, I’m lighting Shabbat candles,” placing their hands over their eyes and singing the candle blessing. Another child placed food on the table. It looked like a Shabbat table. I stood to the side and smiled. I saw how Hebrew had become embedded in their inner world and became not only a means of communication but also a tool for emotional and cultural expression. This is proof that Hebrew doesn’t stay confined to the classroom, but that it lives and breathes in the children’s world.

Hebrew also connects children to the broader Jewish community, both locally and globally. When they hear Bible stories, celebrate Jewish holidays, or offer Hebrew blessings, they feel a sense of partnership with other children around the world doing the same. The language creates cross-border connections and instills in the child a sense of belonging to one people, with a shared language, history, and story.

Teaching Hebrew in early childhood, for me, is far more than language acquisition. When I teach Hebrew, I’m not just teaching words, I’m offering the language to the hearts of children. I am the figure through whom they first experience Hebrew, and through me, they learn what it means. My role is not just to teach a language but to use it to connect children to the heart of their Jewish identity. Through words, children discover who they are, where they come from, and where they belong—and Hebrew is the central tool that accompanies them on this journey.

1 Joshua A. Fishman, *Reversing Language Shift* (Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters, 1991), p. 91.

2 Lev S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

Elinor Barak teaches Junior Kindergarten at The Toronto Heschel School.

"בוקר טוב, מלכה!" — העברית כגשר לזהות יהודית בגיל הרך

מאת אלינור ברק

"בוקר טוב, מלכה!" אני אומרת בחיוך לבבי כשאני פוגשת את תלמידתי. אני מתכופפת לגובה עיניה, מתבוננת בה ואומרת: "איזו שמלה יפה יש לך היום! תראי את כל צבעי הקשת שרקומים עליה." מלכה מחייכת חיוך ביישני וממהרת לשים את שמה בלוח "מי בכיתה?"

המילים הפשוטות הללו — בשפה העברית — הן הרבה מעבר למחמאה. הן יוצרות קשר רגשי, מעניקות תחושת נראות, ומזמינות את מלכה להרגיש שייכת.
הרגע הזה מזכיר לי את מהות שליחותי: לא רק ללמד שפה, אלא להגיש אותה לילדים ככלי לבניית חיבור, ביטחון ומשמעות.

שלמה נכנס, ואני מברכת אותו: "בוקר טוב!"
הוא עונה: "בוקר טוב, מורה אלינור."
אני שואלת איך הוא מרגיש, והוא משיב: "אני שמח."
אני מחייכת אליו ואומרת: "כל הכבוד שלמה, אני מאוד שמחה שאתה מדבר עברית" – ומחבקת אותו בהערכה.

כשאני שומעת ילד מדבר עברית, הלב שלי מתרחב. אני מרגישה שאני לא רק מלמדת – אני פותחת עבורו שער לעולם של זהות, שייכות ותרבות.

אני מאמינה שכאשר השפה מלווה בקשר רגשי חם, הילדים מפתחים אליה יחס חיובי. בעיניהם, העברית אינה רק כלי – היא שפה חמה, עוטפת, שמעניקה ביטחון ושייכות.

כמחנכת לגיל הרך, אני רואה מדי יום כיצד העברית פוגשת את הילדים – לא רק כשפה שימושית, אלא כעולם עשיר של תרבות, מסורת וזהות.

באחד הימים, לאחר ששרנו את "מה נשתנה" לקראת חג הפסח, אחד הילדים פנה אליי ואמר: "גם אבא שלי יודע את השיר הזה." באותו רגע הבנתי שוב את כוחה של השפה: היא גשר חי לבית, לשורשים ולדורות הקודמים.

הוראת העברית בגיל הרך עבורי היא זריעת זהות. בגיל שבו האישיות מתעצבת, השפה יוצרת חיבורים עמוקים – למסורת, לערכים, ולתחושת השתייכות קהילתית. אני רואה איך הילדים נשאבים אל השפה דרך שירים, סיפורים, תנועה ודמיון.

כשאנחנו שרים "מה נשתנה" או "סביבון סוב סוב סוב", זו אינה רק פעילות מוסיקלית – זה טקס שמחבר את הילד לשורשיו התרבותיים.

החוקר ג'ושוע פישמן מזכיר לנו את מקומה המרכזי של השפה בהתפתחותה ובשימורה של תרבות, במיוחד בקרב קבוצות מיעוט. כלומר, אם הילדים לא רוכשים את השפה, משתמשים בה ומרגישים בה בבית – לא משנה כמה נלמד או נחגוג מסורות — הזהות תדעך. דווקא בגיל הרך, כשהשפה נטמעת כחלק מהחוויה, יש לנו הזדמנות לשמר ולהעביר הלאה את הזהות.

תפקידי הוא לחבר את הילדים דרך השימוש בשפה העברית, לא רק למילים, אלא לברכות, למנהגים ולסיפורים היהודיים. כשילד לומד לומר "מודה אני", "שבת שלום" או "תודה", הוא סופג גם את הערכים העמוקים שמאחורי המילים.

אנו רואים את התוצאות בשטח: כאשר הילדים מדברים בעברית על בסיס יומי, שרים שירים, מדקלמים ברכות, משחקים בעברית, שומעים סיפורים ומכירים את סמלי המסורת – הם לא רק לומדים שפה, אלא חיים בה. החוויה הרגשית סביב הלמידה בגיל הרך נטמעת בהם ומשפיעה על עיצוב זהותם וממשיכה להדהד גם בהמשך חייהם.

בהשראת הגישה ההתפתחותית של לב ויגוצקי, אני מבינה שלמידה מתרחשת בתוך הקשר חברתי-תרבותי. המבוגר המשמעותי הוא הגשר בין השפה לעולמו של הילד. כאשר העברית מלווה ברגש, בסיפור, בשיר או בחיבוק — היא נטמעת בילד כחלק מהזהות שלו. היא אינה עוד אובייקט חיצוני – היא הופכת לכלי פנימי לחשיבה, להבנת העולם ולהשתייכות.

המושג של ויגוצקי, "אזור ההתפתחות הקרובה" מתאר את המרחב שבו הילד זקוק להנחיה כדי לגדול. שם, בתוך המרחב הזה, אני פוגשת את הילדים – לא רק כמורה, אלא כשותפה למסע. וכשהכלי המרכזי הוא עברית – המפגש הזה הופך לחוויה של בניית זהות.

אני מקפידה ליצור סביבה עברית חיה: אותיות, שלטים, שמות, ספרים, שירים – כולם בעברית. כל פרט במרחב הלמידה מספר סיפור, מזמין את הילד לחוות את השפה כחלק טבעי מסביבתו ולהיות שותף פעיל בה. העברית אינה "שפה שנלמדת" – היא חלק מהמרחב הטבעי של הילד.

גם למשפחה יש תפקיד חשוב. בכיתה שלנו כל ילד מקבל "חוברת שירים" אישית, עם שירים שנלמדים בגן – בעברית ובאנגלית. החוברת נשלחת הביתה, והופכת לגשר בין הגן לבית. כשילדים שרים בבית שירי חג ומשתמשים במילים עבריות שנלמדו בגן – נוצרת זיקה בין הגן לבית, והעברית מקבלת מקום בחיי המשפחה.

אחת הדרכים האהובות עליי להטמעת השפה העברית היא באמצעות חוויה רב-חושית. כשאני מלמדת מילים חדשות, איני מסתפקת בתמונה או בהסבר בלבד. הילדים שומעים את המילה, רואים אותה באופן חזותי, ואף חווים אותה בגופם – וכך הלמידה הופכת לחווייתית, רגשית ומשמעותית. חלק מהמושגים נטמעים בשיח היומיומי ומקבלים עומק נוסף. לדוגמה, המילה "שופר" נלמדת לא רק בהקשר של ראש השנה ויום כיפור, אלא גם כחלק מכלי שיצרנו בכיתה: "גלגל הקולות".

"גלגל הקולות" הוא כלי חזותי המסייע לילדים להבחין בין רמות שונות של עוצמת קול ולהתאים את השימוש בהן לסיטואציות חברתיות. הילדים לומדים להבחין בין קול פנימי – שבו אנו "מדברים בלב" והקול אינו נשמע כלל; קול חנה – קול חלש מאוד, כמעט בלחש; קול חברותא – קול שקט אך מספיק כדי שחבר או חברה יוכלו לשמוע; קול שיחה – בעוצמה בינונית, המתאימה למעגל שיח קבוצתי; ועד לקול שופר – קול חזק ובטוח, שמתאים לדיבור בפני קהל רחב.

המושג "קול שופר" נוכח בשיח היומיומי בכיתה, והילדים לומדים את המילה "שופר" בהקשר רחב יותר – לא רק ככלי נשיפה, אלא גם כביטוי לעוצמה, לנוכחות ולביטחון. השימוש במושגים השונים האלה בעברית ממחיש לילדים שהשפה מדברת גם דרך צלילים – ולעיתים, דווקא דרך היעדרם – כמו בקול הפנימי.

כאשר אחד הילדים שר בקול שופר במעגל, ואני מחמיאה לו: "איזה יופי, אני שומעת את המילים בקול שופר – וזה מחמם לי את הלב", המושג נטען במשמעות רגשית, בתחושת הצלחה ובחיבור עמוק יותר לשפה.

לא מזמן שמעתי ילדה בפינת הדרמה אומרת לבובה: "שבת שלום, אני מדליקה נרות שבת", היא שמה את שתי ידיה על עיניה והחלה לשיר את הברכה על נרות שבת. ילד נוסף שם דברי אוכל על השולחן. משהו שנדמה כמו שולחן שבת.
עמדתי מהצד וחייכתי. ראיתי כיצד העברית נטמעה בעולמם הפנימי והופכת לא רק לאמצעי תקשורת – אלא גם לכלי לביטוי רגשי ותרבותי. זו עדות לכך שהעברית איננה נשארת בגבולות השיעור – היא חיה ונושמת בתוך עולמם של הילדים.

העברית גם מחברת את הילדים לקהילה היהודית הרחבה – הן זו המקומית והן זו העולמית. כשהם שומעים סיפורים מהתנ"ך, חוגגים את חגי ישראל או מברכים בעברית – הם חווים תחושת שותפות עם ילדים אחרים ברחבי העולם שעושים את אותם הדברים. השפה יוצרת חיבורים חוצי גבולות ומטמיעה בילד תחושת שייכות לעם אחד, בעל שפה משותפת, היסטוריה וסיפור.

לסיום: הוראת העברית בגיל הרך עבורי היא הרבה יותר מרכישת שפה. כשאני מלמדת עברית, אני לא רק מלמדת מילים, אני מגישה את השפה ללב הילדים. אני הדמות שדרכה הם חווים את העברית לראשונה, ודרכי הם לומדים איזו משמעות יש לה. תפקידי הוא לא רק ללמד שפה – אלא להשתמש בה כדי לחבר את הילדים ללב של הזהות היהודית שלהם. דרך המילים, הילדים מגלים מי הם, מהיכן באו ולאן הם שייכים — והעברית היא הכלי המרכזי שמלווה אותם במסע הזה.

"The road to societal death is paved by language activity that is not focused on intergenerational continuity."
Fishman, J. A. (1991). *Reversing Language Shift*. Multilingual Matters.
Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Harvard University Press.

Unplugged Education

FOCUSING ON CORE SKILLS IN A TECH-SATURATED WORLD

BY TALYA METZ

Premature exposure to screens can short-circuit growth of attention spans, self-regulation, and deep thinking.

In today's classrooms, tablets and smartboards are often seen as the cutting edge of learning. Yet as an educator and a parent, I've grown concerned that the *overuse* of technology in schools may actually hinder the development of our children's most essential skills. Mounting research and expert commentary suggest that when it comes to healthy development, less screen time can mean more growth. Rather than racing to put every lesson on an iPad, we need to refocus on the core curriculum of human development—social skills, critical thinking, creativity, and character—the very skills that excessive tech use can erode.

Technology Overload: A Developmental Concern

Evidence is piling up that too much tech, too soon, is not benign. Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt has been sounding the alarm about how smartphones and social media are "rewiring" childhood and teen life. He notes that when schools became saturated with phones and social media around 2012, students stopped talking as much in the hallways and lunchrooms, made less eye contact, and essentially lost practice in face-to-face social skills.[1] Haidt points out that moving kids' social lives online is "not human. It doesn't help them develop. And right away, mental health collapses."[2] In other words, the very social and cognitive development that schools are meant to nurture can be stunted by constant device use.

Developmental psychologists warn that premature exposure to screens can short-circuit the growth of attention spans, self-regulation, and deep thinking. Studies even show that heavy social-media use correlates with spikes in teen depression and anxiety.[3] Young children's brains are still forming vital neural networks; if we flood them with rapid-fire digital stimulation, we risk altering those networks in ways that undermine focus and learning. Simply put, a child glued to a screen is missing out on crucial real-world learning experiences—from reading facial expressions and picking up on social cues to letting their own imagination, not an app, drive their play.

What Tech Leaders Know About Screens

It's telling that many leaders in the technology industry—the very people who create our gadgets and apps—*severely limit their own children's screen time*. They seem to know something that the rest of us are waking up to now. Consider these examples:

- **Bill Gates** didn't let his kids have cell phones until age 14, and he imposed strict screen time caps at home.[4] (In fact, he once noticed his daughter becoming attached to a video game and promptly set new limits.)
- **Steve Jobs**, who gave the world the iPad, refused to let his young kids use it. "We limit how much technology our kids use at home," he famously told a reporter.[5]
- **Mark Zuckerberg** has said he wants his daughters to spend time reading Dr. Seuss and playing outside rather than using apps like Facebook's Messenger Kids.[6]
- In **Silicon Valley**'s most sought-after private schools, such as the Waldorf School of the Peninsula, screens are banned for young children. Instead, the kids of Google, Apple, and eBay employees spend their school days making go-karts, knitting, cooking, and learning through hands-on projects.[7] One Waldorf parent put it bluntly: "Computers and schools don't mix." These elite schools believe screens inhibit creativity, movement, human interaction, and attention spans.

If the gurus of tech themselves are hitting the "Pause" button on gadgets in childhood, shouldn't the rest of us take note? They understand that childhood needs to be rooted in tangible, human experiences, not virtual ones. As one education expert mused, if Steve Jobs's kids had been in a typical public school, they'd be among the only children who opted out of iPad-based learning.[8] That speaks volumes.

Low-Tech by Design: The Heschel Approach

At The Toronto Heschel School, we have embraced a deliberately low-tech, high-engagement model for years—and it turns out we're ahead of the curve. Much like those forward-thinking Silicon Valley schools, Heschel recognizes that deep learning happens through hands-on experience, personal interaction, and real-world exploration. Our classrooms are filled with art, science experiments, discussion, and play, not glowing screens. We intentionally delay heavy use of technology until students are developmentally ready, and gradually introduce digital tools in the upper grades as a supplement to, rather than a replacement for, learning.

Walk into a Heschel Early Years class and you'll see students collaborating on projects, building with blocks, reading actual books, or tending the garden—fully engaged with their teachers and peers. We even collect our Junior High students' phones at the start of each day, freeing them to focus on learning without the buzz of notifications.[9]

It's not that we're anti-technology; we're pro-children. Research affirms what we know: kids learn best through doing, touching, conversing, and reflecting—not just swiping and clicking. By limiting tech distractions, we create space for awe and wonder to take centre stage.

Our approach emphasizes the "soft" skills and human connections that devices can't provide. Social-emotional learning is woven into group work and school life, as children practice empathy, cooperation, and conflict resolution face to face. We encourage eye contact, active listening, and clear speaking—simple, powerful interactions that build confidence and communication abilities.[10] In a world increasingly driven by screens, these human skills aren't old-fashioned—they're essential. As Bill Gates himself has noted, personal connection and social interaction are very important to learning, online tools should only complement, not replace, real relationships.[11]

Core Skills for an AI-Driven Future

Ironically, the less tech we use in the early years, the better prepared our students will be to thrive in an AI-driven future. Why? Because as AI and automation rise, it's the uniquely human skills that matter most. Machines can handle routine coding and data crunching—but creativity, critical thinking, and emotional intelligence? Those are ours alone. These, along with others listed here, are the core skills that Heschel's curriculum prioritizes every single day:

- **Critical Thinking & Problem-Solving:** Instead of feeding students answers through apps, we pose open-ended questions and real-world problems. Students learn to think for themselves—to analyze, hypothesize, and iterate solutions. This kind of flexible, independent thinking is exactly what the future workforce will demand.[12]
- **Creativity & Imagination:** In an age of algorithms, we make sure children still know how to dream and create. Through art, music, storytelling, and integrated projects, Heschel students exercise their imaginations constantly. Creative design sense and cognitive flexibility are like muscles—we give them a daily workout.
- **Focus & Deep Learning:** In our classrooms, handwriting isn't a lost art; it's a daily practice. Research shows that the slow deliberate act of writing by hand boosts memory and comprehension, creating more mental "hooks" for new ideas. Whether journalling or sketching diagrams, our students cultivate deep concentration, which has become an endurance skill in the era of the eight-second attention span.[13]
- **Social & Emotional Skills:** AI cannot replace the power of a team brainstorm or the value of friendship. Through group science experiments and class presentations, Heschel students develop collaboration, leadership, and empathy. They learn to navigate disagreements, express themselves, and build emotional resilience; these are the skills that will carry them through life's challenges. Free play and outdoor education further foster cooperation, risk-taking, and responsibility.

When our students begin using laptops in the later grades, they approach technology mindfully and purposefully. They view devices as tools—for research, writing, creating presentations—rather than as toys or tutors. By Grade 8, a Heschel student is not only technologically literate and confident but also discerning about when and why to use tech. This balanced foundation is the best preparation for high school and beyond.

Real-World Success in a Digital Age

Some parents ask, "If you don't emphasize computers early on, will Heschel graduates fall behind in this high-tech world?" The answer, backed by our alumni's success, is an emphatic "No." Heschel graduates thrive in top high schools and excel in STEM careers, all without having been glued to screens in elementary school. By focusing on core competencies, we produce adaptable learners who can quickly master new technologies as needed. In fact, our students rapidly develop tech skills and many go on to successful careers in computer science and engineering. They succeed not in spite of our low-tech approach, but because of it: their minds are equipped to understand technology's concepts, not just operate gadgets.

At The Toronto Heschel School, we believe education should nurture the whole child. By limiting technology, we create space to teach values, foster curiosity, and ignite a passion for learning. Our intentionally low-tech, high-engagement model might seem countercultural, but it aligns with the insights of child development experts like Jonathan Haidt and practices embraced by even Silicon Valley parents. We're proud to be a leader in this movement. Ultimately, the true "core curriculum" is one that prepares children to be caring, critical, and creative individuals. If that means keeping the gadgets at bay during the school day, it's not a step backward but a leap forward for our children's future. In a world dominated by technology, we're committed to putting children at the heart of education.

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2 Katie Kindelan, "Social Psychologist Says Kids Shouldn't Have Smartphones Before High School," *ABC News*, March 26, 2024, https://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Family/author-suggests-guidelines-parents-kids-phones-social-media/story?id=108509992.

3 Jean M. Twenge, "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?," *The Atlantic*, September 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/.

4 Chris Weller, "Bill Gates Is Surprisingly Strict About His Kids' Tech Use—and It Should Be a Red Flag for the Rest of Us," *Business Insider*, January 14, 2018, https://www.businessinsider.com/how-bill-gates-limits-tech-use-for-his-kids-2018-1.

5 Nick Bilton, "Steve Jobs Was a Low-Tech Parent," *The New York Times*, September 10, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/11/fashion/steve-jobs-apple-was-a-low-tech-parent.html.

6 Dan Evon, "Did Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and Other Tech Billionaire Parents Advocate Limiting Children's Technology Use?," Snopes.com, https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/tech-billionaire-parents-limit/.

7 Chris Weller, "Silicon Valley Parents Are Raising Their Kids Tech-Free—and It Should Be a Red Flag," *Business Insider*, October 27, 2017, https://www.businessinsider.com/screen-time-limits-bill-gates-steve-jobs-red-flag-2017-10.

8 Chris Weller, "Bill Gates and Steve Jobs Raised Their Kids Tech-Free—and It Should Have Been a Red Flag," *The Independent*, October 24, 2017, https://www.independent.co.uk/tech/bill-gates-and-steve-jobs-raised-their-kids-techfree-and-it-should-ve-been-a-red-flag-a8017136.html.

9 The Toronto Heschel School, *Parent Handbook 2023–2024*, February 2024, 12, https://www.torontoheschel.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Parent-Handbook-with-Updated-Dress-Code-2024.pdf.

10 The Toronto Heschel School, "Social-Emotional Learning," How We Teach, accessed July 14, 2025, https://www.torontoheschel.org/how-we-teach/social-emotional-learning.

11 Bill Gates, "Provide Quality Education for All," GatesNotes, accessed July 14, 2025, https://www.gatesnotes.com/meet-bill/provide-quality-education/reader.

12 Ken Robinson, *Out of Our Minds: Learning to Be Creative* (West Sussex: Capstone Publishing, 2017).

13 Audrey L. H. van der Meer and Frederikus R. van der Weel, "Handwriting but not Typewriting Leads to Widespread Brain Connectivity: A High-Density EEG Study with Implications for the Classroom," *Frontiers in Psychology 14* (January 26, 2024), https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1219945.

Talya Metz taught at the Toronto Heschel, then became a mom of Heschel students, a toy store owner, and part-time member of the school's Admissions team.

"The unique attitude of the Jew is not the love of knowledge but the love of studying."

AJ Heschel,
Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity

The Essence of a Jewish Education

BY MICHELLE LANDY SHAVIM & MATTHEW STEIN

The start of a new school year arrives with a comforting sense of ritual—sharpened pencils, clean binders, fresh routines. For Jewish families, the season aligns beautifully with Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year: a combined moment for rethinking priorities and resetting schedules. It's a powerful invitation for parents of school-age children to pause, reflect, and recalibrate. Life is cyclical; once again we can discard what no longer serves us and hold tightly to what does.

In our homes and schools, we are invited to peel away distractions and return to purpose—what Jewish theologian Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel called the "essence" of Jewish life and learning. As we guide our children into another year of learning, we ask: What truly matters in their education? What do we want at the core of their experience?

In the speech entitled *The Spirit of Jewish Education* and delivered to a conference of Jewish educators in 1953, Rabbi Heschel offers a compelling vision for how one generation should educate the next. He advocates for Jewish education that goes beyond academic achievement and ritual observance. He calls for depth, for education that awakens the soul, cultivates awe, and roots our children in moral urgency and sacred meaning.[1]

Heschel emphasizes the individual as the heart of Jewish life. He tells us that the worth of the collective comes from the dignity and uniqueness of each person. Jewish education must awaken in each child a sense of personal responsibility, inner conviction, and the capacity for wonder.

Rabbi Heschel's notion of the spirit of the uniqueness in each child animates the educational goals of The Toronto Heschel School. Each student carries all possibilities. We want each child to shine. Rabbi Shai Held interprets Rabbi Heschel's teaching as a "call to self-transcendence"; transcendence being both the foundation of who God is and who human beings can become.[2]

Toronto Heschel educates to inform and transform. To do this, teachers make sure that the children "participate and share in the spiritual experience of Jewish living," and "what it means to live as a likeness of God."[3] Even as they strengthen students' skills and knowledge, the educators maintain focus on character and conscience. And, they don't stop at personal growth—they teach their students to care for others, seek justice, and work towards peace. The children become curious, compassionate, and courageous. They learn that Jewishness is a way of being in the world, not simply a set of practices. The children develop a genuine love of learning and strong connection to moral responsibility, to the world around them, and to God.

Spirit is not a bonus feature of Jewish education; it is the centre.

What emerges is an appreciation for study that is grounded in ethical awareness. Rabbi Heschel intends Jewish education to provide continual meaning throughout the child's life "in [their] bitter trials, disappointments, and frustrations."[4] Good Jewish education prepares the student to face life's hardest questions with faith and resilience.

Sometimes schools attempt to unify Jewish students through standardized practice. Toronto Heschel unity lies in the shared appreciation that each child, each family, has a unique way of being. We aim for commonality "not on the level of customs, generalities, and external forms of conduct, but on that of the inner life."[5] "We certainly agree in our devotion and in our understanding of the worthwhileness of the Jewish heritage," Heschel writes. "We may differ in formulations, but we have a common concern."[6]

Of course, content and Jewish literacy are vital and the children learn the language, history, and practices of Judaism. But, Rabbi Heschel warns, these are not enough. Without spirit—without a vibrant, searching relationship with the sacred—the rest will not endure.[7] Spirit is not a bonus feature of Jewish education; it is the centre.

At its best, Jewish education prepares children to become partners with God, to be a light unto the nations, and to carry forward a vision of peace and justice. This is the core spirit we must hold. Rabbi Heschel advocates teaching the *mitzvot* (laws) over customs and ceremonies. Written in ancient times and read today with our own eyes, the *mitzvot* awaken the individual to the presence of God and the urgency of moral responsibility. This is not found in ceremonies alone. Good Jewish education cultivates awe for God and all that Judaism can be.

As we enter the new year—with its lists, plans, and calendars—let's focus on what matters most: an education that inspires our children as much as it teaches them. Let's give each child knowledge and skill with the moral strength and insight they will need to build a life of meaning, as Rabbi Heschel describes, "a life that is a work of art." Doing so, we honour the deepest truths of our tradition. We also honour our children by giving them something that is enduring—a faith and purpose to carry with them always. This is why it is so great to start a fresh new year.

1 Also see Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Spirit of Jewish Education," *Jewish Education*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (1953), pp. 9–62, https://doi.org/10.1080/0021642530240202, which is based on the address delivered at the Pedagogic Conference of the Jewish Education Committee of New York City, February 15, 1953.

2 Shai Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), p. 119.

3 Ibid., p. 19.

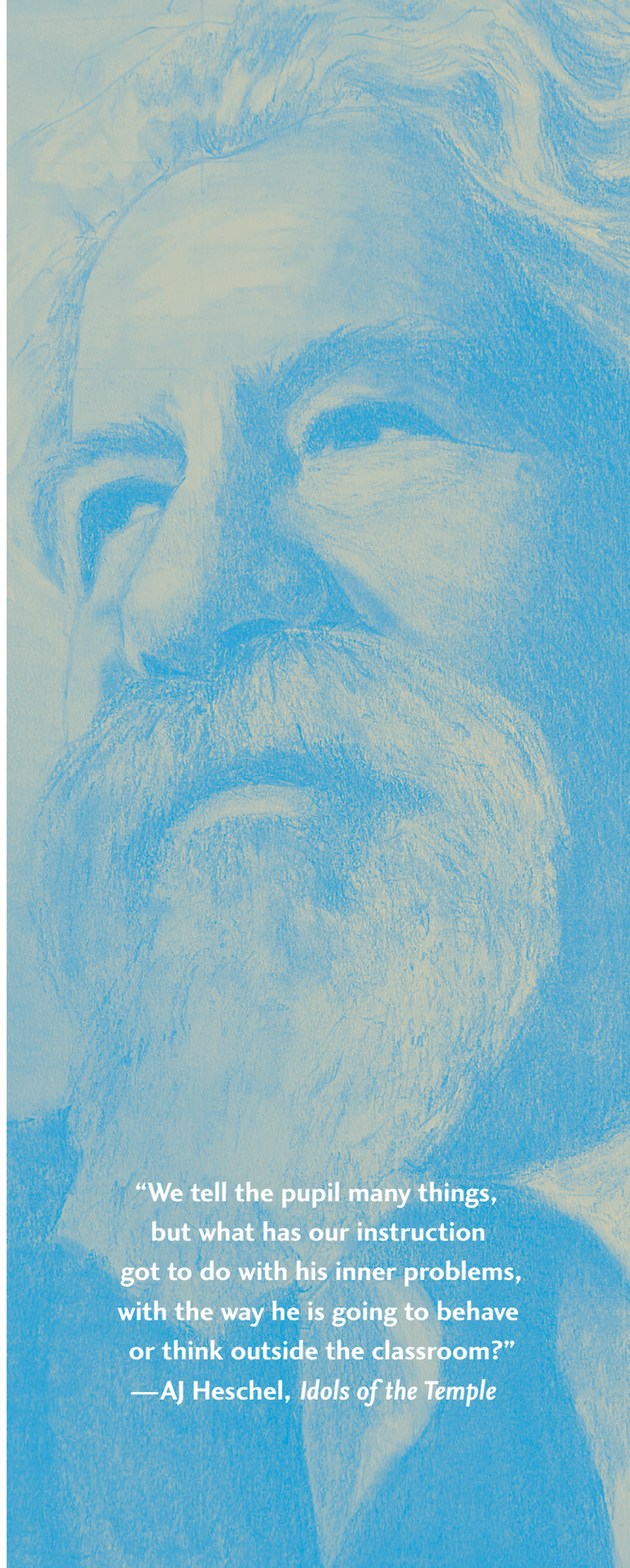
4 Ibid., p. 18.

5 Ibid., p. 12.

6 Ibid., p. 15.

7 Ibid., p. 19.

Michelle Landy Shavim and **Matt Stein** co-chair The Toronto Heschel School council. She is a Heschel parent, he a Heschel alumn 2005.



A Covenant of Belonging

BY RABBI YAEL SPLANSKY

The story is often told of the nine who are looking for the one to complete the *minyan*.[1]

Rabbi Levi Weiman-Kelman of Jerusalem, however, reminds us of the less often told, but more often lived, story of the one who is looking for the nine to complete something, too.

If you are holding this magazine in your hands, chances are you are already attached to a synagogue-community. You may not be able to articulate why. It's just what you do. I actually admire that. I believe we are what we do. More than what we think, more than what we believe, we Jews are what we do. The act of joining a sacred community, showing up to be counted among those committed to spiritual pursuits simply because "this is what Jews do" is actually not simple at all. It is a profound act of faith in the Jewish People—past, present, and future.

In the Shadow of October 7

They say a person's true character reveals itself in times of crisis. The same may be true for communities. While our confidence has been rattled by our neighbours' responses to the war Israel is fighting on many fronts and by the unleashed antisemitism across our country, synagogues of all stripes and sizes have been refuges of strength and stability. Through communal prayer, we calm one another's fears and reinforce one another's hopes. Through Torah learning, we draw on ancient wisdom to shed new light on the experiences of the here and now. Through acts of *chesed* (kindness), we give evidence that while the world may be cruel, it is also kind.

In many congregations, membership is up; school enrollment is up; service attendance is up; conversions are up. Why? Because a synagogue-community is built on shared stories. "Out there" we may have to explain ourselves, our identities, our beliefs. Within the walls of the synagogue, we can intuitively begin the conversation from a place of understanding. There is no explaining to do, only discovery.

It Takes a Village

Rabbi Professor Lawrence Hoffman teaches that people are more inclined to gravitate towards synagogue-community at "nodal moments" of their lives. Whether mourning a loss or bringing a baby into the world, there is a sudden awareness: "I cannot do this alone. I need my people. I need to tap into ancient wisdom to guide my steps." Some nodal moments are easy to recognize. They come at times of transition between one life stage and the next, like preparing for retirement and looking for meaningful volunteerism, or noticing how a newly empty nest makes room for exploring expansive questions about life's purpose.

Nodal moments are also created when the story of the Jewish People shifts. This is undeniably one of those moments. The gravitational pull many are feeling now in the direction of a synagogue is the impulse of Jewish survival kicking into gear. One parent explained: "We never belonged to a synagogue before, but I realize that my kids are not equipped for the world they face. They need stronger Jewish identities and Jewish skills to be able to hold their head up high when the challenges come." Another new congregant shared: "I didn't grow up in a synagogue, so I never learned how to pray. I never had role models of prayerful people. But now I have a lot to pray for, so I've come in search of a community that can show me how." Synagogues are where we—at every stage of our life and times can remember or learn for the first time, who we are, where we come from, and to Whom we belong.

Jewish Baggage

When the match is good, attaching to a sacred community feels like a kind of homecoming and one good thing leads to another with ease. I see it every day. I also recognize that stepping into a synagogue can be daunting for many. Each congregation has its own culture, vocabulary, and rituals. A newcomer can feel like a foreigner. The best way past that is curiosity. Like a good traveller, just ask a simple question and the doors will open.

And then there is something called "Jewish baggage." Many people have hard memories of synagogues. Perhaps it was a strict environment, where children weren't free to be children. Perhaps there was guilt or even shame around expectations of financial contributions. Perhaps the synagogue is associated with a memory of grief. Whatever created a distance between you and your community, on behalf of Jewish leaders everywhere, I apologize. You deserve better. I encourage you to set that Jewish baggage down. You've been carrying it for too long and life is heavy enough as it is. Just as you have changed and grown since then, so have synagogues changed and grown. Let's try again.

Jewish Joy

While we never deny the heaviness of the news of the day, synagogue-communities refuse to let it keep us from the fullness of Jewish life. Every Shabbat still brings uplift. Every lifecycle occasion still brings joy and comfort. Every gathering for lifelong learning still deepens our appreciation for our heritage. Every holyday still reminds us that we belong to a much larger and longer story than the one we write for ourselves. Every time we gather in sacred community to celebrate our traditions and to affirm this God-given life, it is an act of defiance against those who wish us harm.

Two thousand years ago, Hillel warns: "Do not separate yourself from the congregation." Commenting on this dictum, Bartenura of 15th-century Italy explains: "But rather, share in their suffering," because it is taught in the Talmud (Ta'anit 11a): "Anyone who does not belong to the congregation will not get to see the congregation consoled." Simply put, if you aren't there in the hard times, you won't witness the restoration of the community. Why? Because your presence IS part of the healing of the whole. You are an essential part of the whole and you may be surprised to learn that your own fulfillment depends on the whole. The two anchors of Jewish life throughout the millennia are the home and the synagogue. This reciprocal and reinforcing relationship is one of the secrets of our survival. By attaching yourself to a congregation, you enter into a kind of Brit, a Covenant of Belonging, which has long proven its power to sustain.

1 A *minyan* is the group of 10 required for certain prayers.

Rabbi Yael Splansky is the Senior Rabbi of Holy Blossom Temple, Toronto's first synagogue. She holds the Baskin-Garson Senior Rabbinic Chair.

If you have to keep checking the "I'm not a robot" box, maybe it's time to ask yourself some serious questions…

Why Read?

BY JOE KANOFSKY

What happens to our minds when we read regularly and widely?

Let's look at our bodies as an example. A body that ingests fatty foods lacking in nutrition, that consumes tobacco or other benefit-free substances, and that rarely stretches or strengthens its limbs will not be up to many challenges. To this body, stress can be fatal; simply getting around town becomes complicated. Contrast this with a body that exercises regularly, loads up on nutrients and fuel in a healthy and beneficial way, and pushes itself to try out skills. None of us are here forever, but the regular exerciser is more likely not to get winded walking up a flight of stairs.

So goes the mind that exercises itself regularly with literature, meaning fiction, poetry, memoirs, essays, and other quality reading. This mind is flexible, agile, and limber; it meets tests and obstacles with a sense of well-being and excitement, and an optimistic outlook for intellectual and spiritual growth.

Reading is a complex set of actions. We take 26 characters and a few punctuation signs and we explore our vision of the future, our memory of the past, descriptions of great people, and renderings of awful moments. We assess music and art and sculpture and dance; we imagine characters and situations in prose from a few sentences in length to multivolume works. The texts we read remain accessible to anyone who can get their hands on them, no software or interpolating mechanisms (other than perhaps reading glasses) required. We can return to them as we wish.

Why not just watch a movie, you may protest? The answer is that a movie is a passive, rather than an active, form of engagement. Digital media is rendering us passive consumers who are increasingly unable to think in different ways about the same problem. The speed, immense visual trickery, and awesome detail of digital media captivate our attention fully.

When we read at our own pace, we create the sounds, characters, costumes, and voices in our own heads. We engage with and appreciate the writers' views on their lives, their experiences, feelings, sensations, and ideals whether fictional or otherwise constructed. All told, we put ourselves as human interactors into the flow of human ideas and ideals. We feed ourselves with nutrients that build mental muscle and put ourselves through the paces that stretch and strengthen our reserves.

While reading history or biography uses a lot of the same mental tools, there is something even more powerful about reading fiction, or plays, or poems. And that is imagination. Through these creative sorts of texts, we nourish our own imagination building upon the author's imagination. That is the ability, even the challenge, to pack tastes, memories, hopes, fantasies, and feelings into those 26 characters and a few punctuation marks we mentioned before. We try to understand another person's emotions and sensations through how they are being expressed to us by the author, and we are delighted, or sometimes dismayed, and even sometimes distracted, by the emotions and sensations their words can awaken in our own selves.

Literature is part of "The Humanities"—it helps us be more human. Reading literature helps develop a sense of perspective on ourselves, how we may not have been first with an idea or to make a particular mistake or social gaffe; others have preceded us. These others have chronicled their anxieties about work, love, relationships, and aging. They have written diaries or poems or memoirs or longer fiction that resonate with our own struggles or aspirations.

Reading literary books also develops our own rich and nuanced repertoire of how to talk about ourselves, about each other, and with one another. We enrich our own vocabulary of the soul and the heart. And we can develop one of the most essential tools for living: a sense of humour, about others, our world, and about ourselves. Nobel Laureate Henri Bergson wrote in his essay "Laughter" that humour is the gap between what is expected and what actually happens.

Focus is an essential skill that reading books helps build. Reading books or anything else on your phone or tablet helps destroy the ability to focus. Focus means marginalizing distraction and concentrating on one thing. Our times have many great misconceptions; one of them is that we can truly "multitask," or do several things at one time. The truth is we can do several things at one time only if we do them poorly.

Reading on a web-enabled device is too tempting, even if you disable pop-ups and notifications. It's too easy after a half a page to "just check" the news or email or the markets or texts or anything else. This halts our immersion in the story, the images, the feelings, and the imaginative process of being drawn in and engaging our humanity by connecting with the author's or the characters' humanity. If you have to keep checking the "I'm not a robot" box, maybe it's time to ask yourself some serious questions…

Joe Kanofsky, Ph.D., is Rabbi of Kehillat Shaarei Torah in Toronto.

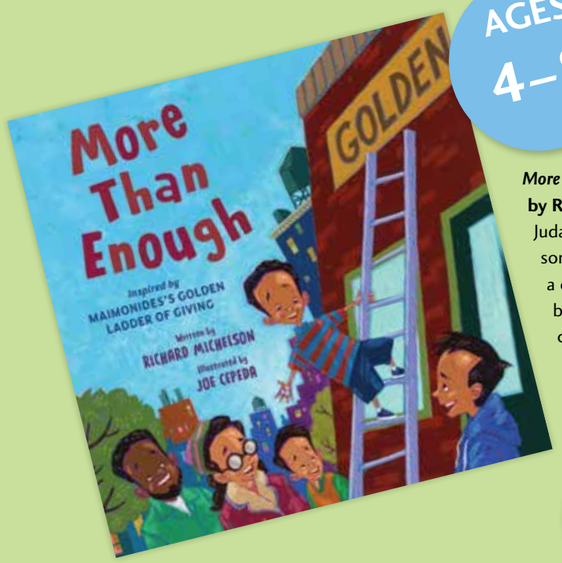
Good Books

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHILDREN AND THE PEOPLE WHO LOVE THEM

BY GAIL BAKER & TZIPORAH COHEN

***Rising*, by Sidura Ludwig and illustrated by Sophia Vincent Guy (Candlewick, 2024)**
In our complicated and busy times, *Rising* helps the reader pause and appreciate the slower, simpler moments. This lyrical picture book celebrates the quiet weekly tradition of a parent and child making challah together. The process can't be rushed, and patience is rewarded by the pleasure of sharing bread at the Shabbat table with family.

AGES 4–8



***More Than Enough: Inspired by Maimonides's Golden Ladder of Giving*, by Richard Michaelson and illustrated by Joe Cepeda (Candlewick, 2025)**
Judaism mandates that those who can give *tzedakah* (charity) should. Helping someone in a moment of need is the first priority, but it may also release a cascade of neighbour helping neighbour. This brightly coloured picture book with diverse characters introduces the concept of giving to one's own community and beyond.

AGES 4–8

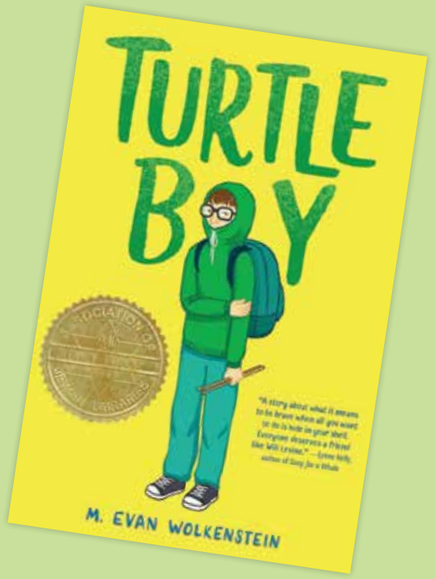
***Forest Bath Right Down This Path*, by Lisa Robinson and illustrated by Khoa Le (Sounds True, 2023)**
Attention parents! We all need reminders to put down our devices and pay attention to the physical world around us. Forest bathing—walking in a natural environment while consciously taking in the sights, smells, and sounds of nature—is a perfect antidote to stress and anxiety. Sometimes, as depicted in this relaxing and informative picture book, our children can teach us this.

AGES 3–8

***Joyful Song: A Naming Story*, by Lesléa Newman and illustrated by Susan Gal (Levine Querido, 2024)**
Tradition is our anchor in tough times. It's Shabbat and big brother must wait until the naming ceremony before telling his neighbours his new baby sister's name. This picture book is full of colour and palpable joy—a perfect read for families welcoming a new sibling and any reader needing a smile.

***Across So Many Seas*, by Ruth Behar (Nancy Paulson Books, 2024)**
For centuries, the Jewish people have been moving and migrating, often in extremely challenging circumstances. Knowing our own stories can strengthen our resilience so that we react effectively in ever-changing times. This engaging saga tells of four Sephardic Jewish girls and their families who navigate displacement and immigration across 500 years.

AGES 10–14



***Turtle Boy*, by M. Evan Wolkenstein (Delacorte Press, 2020)**
Middle-school students will identify with this protagonist, Will Levine, as he struggles with friendship, identity, overcoming challenges, and reaching self-acceptance. Will has a mild facial deformity, which gives rise to unwanted comments and questions from his peers. He is also coping with grief, surgery, and bar mitzvah preparations. With the support of close family and a few friends, Will emerges as a confident 13-year-old.

Gail Baker co-founded The Toronto Heschel School in 1996, serving as Head of School from 2001 to 2014. Gail is now a grandparent at the school.
Tziporah Cohen is a psychiatrist and children's author, and a former Toronto Heschel parent. Her newest picture books are *Afikomen* (Groundwood Books) and *City Beet* (Sleeping Bear Press), both published in March 2023.

The Toronto Heschel School

בית הספר על שם השל

The Toronto Heschel School integrates academic excellence with meaningful Jewish learning in a warm and pluralistic school community, educating confident critical thinkers who are curious, passionate, and caring.

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