

CURRICULUM SPOTLIGHTS Nº1

THiNK

THE
LOLA
STEIN
INSTITUTE
JOURNAL

INTEGRATED JEWISH EDUCATION AT THE TORONTO HESCHEL SCHOOL

GRADE
ONE

Integrated learning describes a theory and process of cross-disciplinary thinking that gives students the skills they need for a complex world. It bridges academic disciplines and silos of knowledge. It develops flexible and critical thinking skills. Children understand their integrated Jewish-Canadian identity and their individuality within community. Thinking Jewish and Jewish thinking combine academic excellence with the wonders of an integrated mind, body, and spirit.



For your miracles, that each day are
with us, and for your wonders and
goodness, that are at every moment,
evening, morning, and midday.

When a six year-old says, “I am going to look beyond the obvious,” he/she is thinking at a higher level of consciousness than is generally expected in Grade 1. Nonetheless, Rachely Tal says it’s the upshot of “Matter, Metamorphosis, and Miracles.”

The premise of “Matter, Metamorphosis, and Miracles” is twofold: an appreciation of miracles transforms how we think about the world, and we behave better for it. I discussed this integrative program—and its empirical, spiritual, and meta-cognitive mix—with Tal, Galit Babitsky, and Elissa Wolf, first grade teachers at The Toronto Heschel School. They use the wonder of miracles to demonstrate that the world can always teach, that change is the true constant, and that attention to detail delivers great learning.

We don’t proclaim miracles, explains Babitsky, we notice something extra-special and seize a learning moment. Perhaps we notice because it seems unusual; perhaps because it doesn’t. We can see everything as a miracle, something that God makes happen to call our attention to it. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel writes,

The great quality of a miracle is not it being an unexpected, unbelievable event in which the presence of the holy bursts forth, but in its happening to human beings, who are profoundly astonished by such an outburst.¹

The teachers present miracles as evidence of tangible natural change, not magic. How does that tiny bud blossom into something so beautiful? Why do those ants know where to go? Wolf says the enthusiasm for learning that materializes as the children find miracles is itself very inspiring.

Their explanation of miracles begins with “Moses’ Miraculous Method,” a term coined by Greg Beiles, and now part of school lore. In the hot desert, many bushes burn in the heat and many shepherds walk by the smoking twigs. One shepherd, Moses, stopped to look closely, ask questions, and deliberate on the significance (Exodus 3); the result was an encounter that changed his life.

The children become Miracle Detectives, in training to take the time to notice that miracles happen all around

The World Is My Teacher

MATTER, METAMORPHOSIS, AND MIRACLES IN GRADE 1

BY PAM MEDJUCK STEIN

them. They practise close observation. They leave the classroom, step outside, stop, and look around carefully. Tasked to be aware, both in the moment and day by day, they search the school's field and garden for changes transpiring naturally. In booklets, they note descriptions of miracles they find: plants sprouting, new twigs, weeds.

Their questions become self-aware and self-reflective: What am I seeing here? Is this a constant or does it change? How is this happening? And why is it happening to me? Was it because I was looking at nature? Because I was paying attention? Engagement with attention puts the children personally in the miracle, and they like it: What do I notice? What can I learn from this? What might God want me to learn from this? They are seeking miracles in a non-traditional way, neither as an indecipherable mystery nor as something to accept passively. They notice the reciprocity.

The children contemplate the elements that make them notice: looking carefully and mindfully, using all their senses to find as many details as possible, asking questions, looking again—they learn that their thoughtful attention reveals miracles, which is probably what God wants.

"Matter, Metamorphosis, and Miracles" weaves through several Grade 1 classes. Tal shares that singing the learning makes it second nature. Going about their work, students sing the steps to seeing a miracle, in Hebrew, "I was walking by, I noticed, I stopped, I looked closely, I asked a question, I had a deeper understanding, I was amazed by the miracle." Tal includes Hebrew vocabulary for snow, rain, thunder—one constant change in Canada is our weather.

In their Language Arts Writers' Workshop, students write personal narratives expanding a precious moment through descriptive words and details. The method corresponds to the sequence for miracle sleuthing: Pause, observe, and identify details; then learn, reflect, and write. The process is profound on its own, and very Jewish.

In science, the children study three states of matter in nature—solid, liquid, and gas—and change agents that affect them. Moses' Miraculous Method compares to the Scientific Method—observe, question, hypothesize. Students see how the agency of temperature changes water from ice to liquid

to vapour. They undertake a proof exercise; shaking cream, sugar, and milk in a bag surrounded by ice to produce ice cream. God provides nature; our interventions deliver delicious results.

The teachers explain that, for young children to grasp the full meaning of agency, reflections on responsibility are needed. For example, Chanukah commemorates the miracle of oil lasting eight nights, against all expectations. The *hal-akhah* (rule) requires a Chanukah light to last one hour, and so, to fulfill the tradition responsibly, the children investigate which oil—soy, paraffin, beeswax, or olive—works best. Testing a range of considerations, paraffin is found most efficient, but least ecologically sound. Olive oil wins.

In math, students meet the miraculous utility of numbers. They absorb the importance of the unit of 10 in our counting system—10 fingers, 10 toes, 10 for *minyan*, 10 Commandments, Yom Kippur on the 10th of Tishrei. They then find Miraculous Matches which are pairs of numbers between 0 and 10 that will always add up to 10, such as $2 + 8$, $4 + 6$, or $9 + 1$. Miraculous Matches also help with subtraction between 0 and 10 because if $9 + 1 = 10$ then you can know that $10 - 1 = 9$. This early competency in Miraculous Matches gives young children a strong facility to add and subtract, first at lower levels, then higher. Based on visualization and a sensibility for the missing matching number, they can use it to estimate mathematically.

"Matter, Metamorphosis, and Miracles" levers foundational learning discoveries one to another. As a *modus operandi*—an M.O.—"Observe, notice, articulate" helps children develop consciousness and concretize thoughts. Science studies introduce the nature of matter and the notion of agency, along with discussion on God's role and our responsibilities. Miraculous Matches empower the utility of numbers as students accustom themselves to manipulate the numerical symbols our world relies on and solve problems that circumstances present. When six year-olds recognize the world as their teacher, they own the wonder of miracles personally and forever. It's a very strong start.

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Israel: An Echo of Eternity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), p. 6.

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."¹

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

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 ושלגים.
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

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

of the brain simultaneously, thereby increasing the brain’s capacity to acquire and retain information.²

In *Music and Learning: Seven Ways to Use Music in the Classroom*, Chris Brewer³ 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).

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At The Toronto Heschel School, we use curriculum for interpersonal connection between our students as well as for academic content. Our Grade 1 students are curious, excited, and eager to learn new things, but if we want them to thrive in a learning environment, and to meet their maximum potential, we know that they need to feel comfortable with who they are with and where they are.

What helps them feel at ease is a warm, personal association with the people and the world around them. The bond emerges nicely if they sense that they are part of a community that accepts, sees, and hears them for who they are. At The Toronto Heschel School, we intentionally create a Grade 1 curriculum that simultaneously achieves these two ends: it is designed to meet youngsters' emotional needs so that they flourish at

Create with a Wise Heart, Share with a Generous Heart

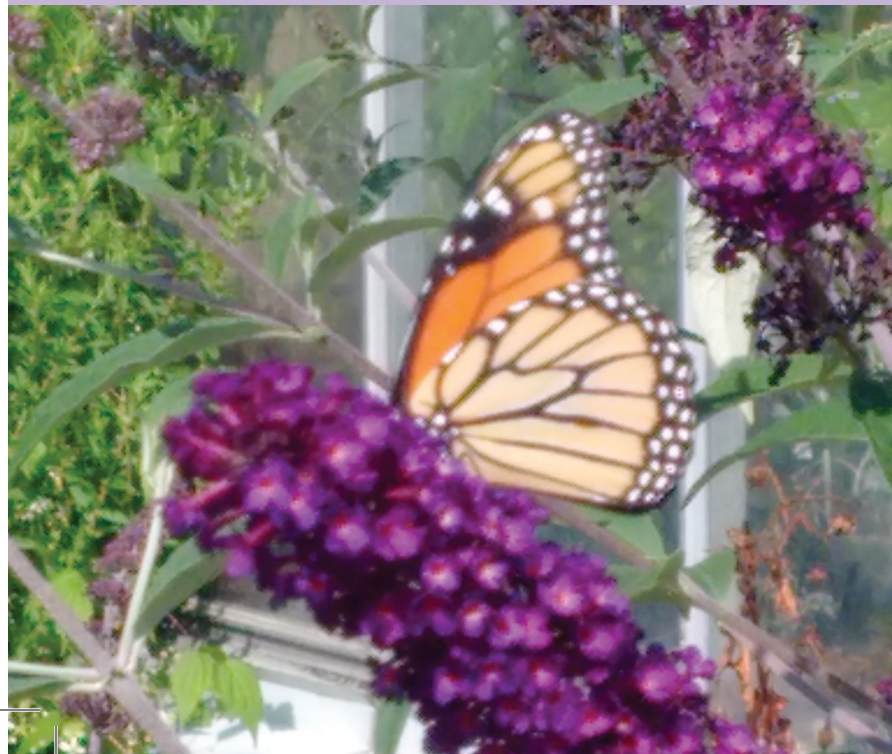
BY ELISSA WOLFF AND DVORA GOODMAN



school, and it is a program of study that delivers important skills and content. Teaching in this manner pairs emotional growth with academic achievement.

One beautiful example that illustrates this double duty is when we teach the children about different kinds of communities and how the role of each individual within the community is integral to its success. Our generative topic, "I Create with a Wise Heart and Share with a Generous Heart," *Chacham lev v'nadiv lev*, is rooted in the Torah (Exodus 35:21–29). The terms, wise heart and generous heart refer to the different characteristics that the Jewish people had to bring forward to create the *mishkan* (Tabernacle) in the desert.

At this time, in the Torah narrative, the people of Israel had not yet received the Torah and so were not yet a Jewish nation.



They were individuals who had been freed from slavery and were in the process of transforming into a nation through their journey in the desert together. To build the *mishkan*, each Israelite was called on to bring their natural skills and talents, meaning their *wise heart*, to the project, and each had to be willing, with their *generous heart*, to contribute their skills to the community. Each skill and each job was important; the community could not be built with only one skill set, nor could the community be built without the generosity of its members. Mastery of skills went hand in hand with camaraderie and collaboration.

Our Grade 1 uses this Torah story as a springboard to emphasize the value of individuals within a community and how each has a responsibility to the group. We first ask the children to reflect on their own wise heart and their generous heart and to sketch out examples of ways that they contribute to those around them. We consider people in our community who help one another and notice how they work together.

We look at parents and their jobs at home and at work. We also look at the Heschel School community and the roles that different people play at school and how their different responsibilities interconnect. Throughout the study, we encourage the children to look to see what they might do, and how they might help their family and community.

We then look beyond home to Israel and Kibbutz Lotan, an eco-Zionist kibbutz in the south that refrains from pesticides, builds natural homes, and fosters an overall eco-friendly ethic. The children consider what they can learn from Kibbutz Lotan to help our Heschel community: last year they made beautiful plaques for our school garden to indicate what is growing in each garden bed.

As we continue thinking about what we can do together to help our community, we choose to help the animals around us. We study the monarch butterfly that is in danger of becoming extinct. Using their wise heart (*chacham lev*), the children explore information, becoming monarch butterfly “experts.” Then, using their generous heart (*nadiv lev*), they decide to help butterflies through raising awareness around our school about the urgency to protect the monarchs.

We bring caterpillars into the classroom, watch them grow, and think about how to keep them well fed, safe, and healthy. We design and plant a special butterfly area in the school garden using milkweed and other flowers that butterflies like. When our caterpillars morph into butterflies, we free them into the garden, hoping they will thrive on the plants we nurture for them. We talk about how the transformation of the people of Israel into a nation, like the metamorphosis of the caterpillar into a butterfly, was a process that was successful through shared responsibility, skill, and care.

Meanwhile in language arts we introduce the children to a more abstract notion of process and we learn about procedural

writing. The students are given the task of writing a procedural text (a how-to story) that teaches their readers about something that they, the writers, are good at doing. The children ask: “How can I give? How can I use what I’m good at doing to give and help others?” They think through the challenge of explaining something carefully and then write down the process, the goal, and the rationale.

Teaching in this manner pairs emotional growth with academic achievement.

The *Chacham lev v’nadiv lev* unit culminates with a class ceremony where the first grade students receive a *siddur*; we call it *Kabbalat HaSiddur*. The ceremony is not a performance but an opportunity for the children to sit with their families and personally guide their families through the process of communal prayer. They have spent the year learning to read confidently in Hebrew and follow a prayer service with *kavannah* (intentionality) and meaning. They can now pray together and understand the meaning of the specific prayers. Feeling confident in their learning, they now teach their families to share in the experience of prayer. Equipped with their *siddurim*, they are ready to participate and also to lead. The *siddur* ceremony demonstrates their growth as individuals and as members of a community.

Our journey to create with a wise heart and to share with a generous heart sparks a personal sense of social responsibility and of collective effort, the twin feeling of being unique and part of a community. Through the metamorphosis of the butterflies, the duty to build the *mishkan*, and the effort to write a story, the children learn that nature is complemented by intention, and that the individual and team exist together.

A sense of feeling comfortable while learning and discovering, as well as trying new things as a group of friends and colleagues, begins to emerge. Even as they are busy with understanding Torah, procedural writing, and the spirituality of the *siddur*, we see the class coalesce into a comfortable, warm, and earnest group of collaborators who are ready, able, and excited to meet the demands of Grade 2.

Elissa Wolff is a Grade 1 teacher at The Toronto Heschel School. She has a B.Ed. and an Honours B.A. in Psychology. Elissa first started at Heschel in 2000 as a volunteer and administrative assistant. Being at Toronto Heschel inspired her to go back to school and become a teacher.

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CURRICULUM SPOTLIGHTS shine on our classrooms, school-wide programs and educational approach. They come from THINK, a semi-annual journal produced by The Lola Stein Institute (LSI), the research and publication arm of The Toronto Heschel School. THINK presents contributions from educators, parents, and community members on integrated Jewish education, critical themes on raising children today, and the interactivity of school and community.

There are many activities described in the Curriculum Spotlights, some of which may not be in current practice. The Toronto Heschel School's activities and curriculum evolve constantly as its educators continue to add wisdom and inspiration, but the ideas and philosophy remain constant.



The Toronto Heschel School
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