

An abstract painting serves as the background for the cover. It features dark, textured brushstrokes in shades of grey and black. Bright, vibrant streaks of green and yellow paint are applied diagonally across the composition. In the center, there is a large, circular area of swirling yellow and orange paint. Several Hebrew words are written in black ink: 'עֵשָׂו' (Esau) is visible in the upper left, 'וְקָל שֶׁפָּר' (V'kal shepar) is written across the central yellow-orange swirl, and 'וְיִצְחָק' (Yitzhak) is partially visible on the left side.

CURRICULUM SPOTLIGHTS No1

THiNK

THE
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INTEGRATED JEWISH EDUCATION AT THE TORONTO HESCHEL SCHOOL

GRADE
FIVE

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.

Weaving Narratives

TIGHT SCRUTINY FOR EXPANSIVE INSIGHT

BY LISA RENDELY

“Follow the Drinking Gourd” is a simple song about following a road to freedom. A resonant, catchy tune. For the uninitiated, the song reminds us about the struggle for freedom. For slaves escaping the American South along the Underground Railroad, it provided codes for their journey. The drinking gourd, the song’s namesake, is the Big Dipper, seven stars grouped to outline a ladle with its handle pointing towards the North Star. Slaves used this beacon to direct them to freedom.

The simplicity of the symbol belies its complexity. Its secrets, sung by slaves, fooled overseers and plantation owners, who thought the slaves were subhuman, incapable of developing intricate support systems for their brethren’s escape.

With years of practise already behind them, Grade 5 students at The Toronto Heschel School are well versed in analyzing symbols, artifacts, and text for hidden meaning. Now, to explore the theme “From Slavery to Freedom,” they examine and compare Judaic and secular texts, searching for valuable information beneath surface words. They try to break codes embedded in text language, just as slaves sought to break the codes of oppression. They are primed to weave an emotionally complex narrative across a logistically complex set of content areas.

Students’ enthusiasm for “From Slavery to Freedom” shows in the seriousness with which they undertake the study. The rationale for saddling young learners with the responsibility of such a sophisticated curriculum reveals its merit; the complicated nature of the task is precisely why it works so well. Students feel challenged but also they feel entrusted, and therefore respected, to work through heavy ideas and emotions as individuals and as a team. Grade 5 students rise to the occasion; they sink their teeth into complex ideas and surpass their own expectations.

Reading the Passover story as detectives looking for clues, they search the text for “knots,” or *kesharim*: moments of enslavement, despair, or loss of humanity. Such moments might include Moshe watching Hebrews being whipped by a taskmaster, or Pharaoh hardening his heart and denying freedom after each escalating plague.

Students also explore the text for “loops,” or *lula’ot*: moments of hope, humanity, or possibility. Each small circumstance is a loosening, a crack that opens the door to freedom,

if ever so slightly: Miriam, Yocheved, and the midwives save Moshe from the Nile; Moshe notices and approaches a burning bush; slaves run under cover of night with unleavened bread.

The students recognize the significance of each of these moments and understand how events that are marginal, maybe scarcely visible, can lead to monumental change. Had Moshe continued to tend his sheep and not investigate a flaming bush that did not burn, he would not have become the leader of the Jewish people, the beacon to guide them out of slavery. The North Star. The Drinking Gourd.

Working with their Chumash teacher, the students isolate passages in *Sefer Shemot* (the Book of Exodus) that pinpoint moments of restriction and opportunities for freedom. With their art teacher, they learn the art of macramé as a playful medium to illustrate—metaphorically—these significant moments. Each bit of text is ascribed a meaning and either a macramé knot or loop. The playful nature of working with macramé assumes a serious tone as students weave their ropes into 3D sculptures, intertwining knots, loops, and words of text thoughtfully. The knots, loops, and stitches illustrate enslavement and liberation, moments of intense struggle or slight loosening in the fabric of indenture. Chosen words of text also weave through the artwork in an abstract narration of the Exodus as the configuration or sequence creates a network of passages. The multi-step process requires the Grade 5 children to produce a symbolic representation of a complex set of ideas.

To work as artists like this—with defined vocabulary and minimal materials—generates intense class debate about whether a specific macramé stitch should represent a knot or a loop. The attribution process involves the creative application of sophisticated knowledge and understanding. Students observe that a knot, a restriction, loosened ever so slightly, can become a loop, an opening. They notice that the reverse is also true; an opening can tighten back if not acted on with urgency. Macramé offers a tactile way to navigate, break, or increase the razor-thin tension between freedom and oppression.

The students are reading Barbara Smucker’s novel *Underground to Canada*, and searching for the codes and symbols used by Julilly, a 13-year-old slave, and her friends to

escape the American South. Reading closely, students notice moments of tension and opportunity beneath the storyline and attune to passwords, secret codes, and opportunities that systematically advance freedom. They delve further into text analysis and seek parallels with the Book of Exodus.

Their years of interdisciplinary thinking help them consider the two narratives in concert; they are adept at integrating complex notions. They craft a Seder Plate for Julilly and adorn it with touchpoints from her narrative that reflect her slavery, escape, and freedom. They pick up on key details in Julilly's story, choosing symbols with conviction and passion, and supporting their choices with quotes from Exodus and the novel, eager to justify their multi-layered decisions. Their creations mirror the five symbols of the Passover Seder plate that depict the Israelites' Exodus: bitter herbs for hardship, *charoset* for mortar made by slaves; a Pascal offering remembering the doorposts of safety; an egg for rebirth; and a green vegetable for renewal.

Analyzing symbols sensitizes students to notice knots and loops in their own lives. They attune to the nuances of racism and "othering," to codes that keep people down, and to small moments that open possibilities for change.

That Grade 5 students have the capacity to recognize, analyze, and connect symbols demonstrates their thorough understanding of what a symbol inherently is: a visible sign of something invisible. The sophistication of thought required to identify the components of meaning in a simple object, word, or location validates the years of text study and meaning-making that they experience at Toronto Heschel. When is a star more than a shining beacon in the sky? When it becomes a compass that guides to freedom. When is a quilt more than a collage of scraps? When it marks a safe space or depicts an arrow pointing the way. When is a candle in the window more than a way to light a room? When it's in a window of a station house along the Underground Railroad. Meaning within a symbol makes something from nothing. The capacity to identify meaning marks students' learning.

Lisa Rendely teaches Grade 5 and visual art at The Toronto Heschel School. She studied and practised architecture before pursuing a career in education, and integrates art and design in her daily classroom teaching.



**Fifth graders rise to the occasion;
they sink their teeth into complex ideas
and surpass their own expectations.**



Behind the Scenes

DRAMA TECHNIQUES FOR SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

BY ORLY BOROVICH &
NECHAMA DROOKMAN

Dramatic arts incorporates and emphasizes the very techniques that children use naturally to learn languages: gesture, improvisation, experimentation with voice and sound, repetition, iterative modification, and, of course, dialogue and conversation. Early childhood language development typically requires around five years, during which time children absorb and mirror their caregivers' communication skills to get their basic needs met. They communicate pain, hunger, or discomfort by crying or writhing their bodies; they express pleasure by giggling, smiling, and laughing. Later on, children experiment with newfound vocal chords to create combinations of real and nonsense words. Gradually, they begin producing coherent words and phrases, and eventually full sentences.

In second language learning, it is impossible to relive those original language development stages. Second language acquisition requires an accelerated process, not unlike a theatrical production. At the theatre, intentionally devised scripts, blocking, and acting techniques are employed to engage the audience in a range of human experiences in a concentrated amount of time. Theatre and drama mimic and intensify normal human speech and action. Similarly, effective second language instruction and learning mimics natural language processing in an intensified, intentional way.

Traditionally, second language teaching overly relies on reading, writing, and rote memorization. In fact, language learning is a full-body experience. Professors Giovanni Buccino and Marco Mezzadri, in their work on *embodied language processing*, posit that language acquisition is more effective when both cognitive and sensori-motor brain functions are at play.¹ In our Hebrew language lessons, students combine drama techniques for movement with vocalization in order to internalize new vocabulary and sentence structures. Rather than memorizing lists of vocabulary, students link words and phrases to meaning by reciting and enacting carefully scripted movement sequences called *sidrat tenuot*. The practice preserves vocabulary and its meaning in the muscle memory of the body.

Like theatre, language learning is part of a broader cultural context. Jewish culture, tradition, and pedagogy privileges voice and speech. According to biblical tradition, the world is spoken into existence ("And God said..."). Victoria Hannah, Israeli singer and language researcher, describes how Hebrew letters and vowels hold inherent meaning within their very shapes and sounds. In her talk "Music and Brains: The Surprising Link,"² Hannah states that "in the Jewish tradition, the letters are not divided and are not



separated from the meaning, and the meaning is not separated from the physical existence and from the sound.” Inspired by Hannah’s work on articulation and meaning, we employ a drama voice warm-up activity that teaches the final sound of Hebrew verbs. This final sound conveys the pronoun declension associated with each verb. Students chant:

Ani ni ni ni ni ni...amarti ti ti ti ti...
Ata ta ta ta ta ta...amarta ta ta ta ta...
Anachnu nu nu nu nu nu...amarnu nu nu nu nu...
Atem em em em em em...artem em em em...

Which translates as:

I, I, I, I said said said said
You, oo, oo, oo, oo said, said, said, said
We, ee, ee, ee, ee said, said, said, said

Through this exercise sound and meaning converge in an activity that also trains students’ articulation and enunciation skills. Rote memorization is replaced with action and satisfying sound play.

The Passover Haggadah teaches that if a child does not know how to ask a question, a parent should “open the mouth for him,” implying that we must prompt our children to speak regardless of their abilities. Counter to the notion that speech is just thought put into words, Jewish tradition suggests that often words precede, or at least, help to initiate thought. The psychologist Lev Vygotsky explains how thought and speech interact in complex ways to form meaning. Oftentimes, young children experiment with words and sounds prior to knowing their meaning. Meaning, then, is formed in the response of the caregiver or other contextual feedback to the child’s utterance.³

Theatre and drama equip teachers with techniques to construct the meaningful contexts and feedback mechanisms that language learning requires. We have begun to incorporate one such technique called “choral call and response” into our Hebrew classes. In this carefully staged exercise, we prompt students to *act* as if they cannot hear one another, while they converse. One student makes declarative statements, while a second replies with a question, prompting the first student to respond again emphatically.

Student Alef: “I ate an apple yesterday.”

Student Bet: “What?”

Student Alef: (somewhat louder) “I ate an apple yesterday.”

Student Bet: “What?”

Student Alef: (shouting) “I ate an apple yesterday!”

Student Bet: “Oh! *You* ate an apple yesterday!”

Entire class: (proclaim) “*She/he* ate an apple yesterday!”

The dramatization enables students to practise transitioning between first, second, and third person pronouns and verb declensions as they ask and respond to questions. They learn to shift between pronouns and declensions not by reciting them from a chart but by responding to each other in conversation where the shifts make sense.

The choral call and response exercise is based on the concept of situational language teaching (SLT). SLT was developed by British linguists Harold Palmer and A.S. Hornby in order to mitigate the instinct of learners to translate grammar and vocabulary from their language of origin to their second language of study.⁴ The tactic immerses students in an authentic conversation that draws out the grammatical structures under instruction.

As techniques for language learning, theatre and drama are never just about “putting on plays.” Nevertheless, staging a performance in a second language is another powerful mechanism to consolidate language learning. As students commit second language scripts to memory and rehearse enthusiastically with others, language becomes deeply ingrained in the body and mind. Practising the mindfulness, relaxation, and breathing techniques used by performers empowers students with techniques to reduce performance anxiety and gain confidence—all in another language! Finally, when the curtain rises and the lights come on and students perform for peers and parents in their second language, the learning receives its ultimate reward: social meaning and relevance.

We don’t just learn another language for a test. We learn language to communicate thoughts and emotions, and to receive in return a response—laughter, tears, and appreciative applause. In Hebrew it’s called *nachas*.

1 Giovanni Buccino and Marco Mezzadri, “Embodied Language and the Process of Language Learning and Teaching,” in *Emotion in Language*, ed. Ulrike Luedtke (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2015), pp. 191–207, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/286441243_Embodied_language_and_the_process_of_language_learning_and_teaching

2 Victoria Hanna, “Music and Brains: The Surprising Link: An Interface Between Music, Cognition and Neuroscience,” presentation at the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance, February 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fGliOFFUkoQ>

3 Lev Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, trans. Alex Kozulin (Boston: MIT Press, 1986).

4 Shafaat Hussain, “Oral Approach and Situational Language Teaching: A Short Review,” *PARIPEX: Indian Journal of Research*, Vol. 4, No. 6 (June 2015), pp. 197–199, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/314895766_Oral_Approach_and_Situational_Language_Teaching_A_Short_Review

Staging a performance in a second language is a powerful mechanism to consolidate language learning.

When students consider the interrelationship of body, food, environment, ethics, and Judaism, the experience of eating has more meaning.

Food for Thought

SATISFACTION GUARANTEED

BY LISA RENDELY AND MARISSA UNRUH

Good morning! You are sitting down with your family to a breakfast of free-range eggs, locally baked whole-grain toast, Ontario berries, free-trade coffee, and organic milk. You feel satisfied knowing that you are refuelling your body with nutrition and energy. You feel grateful for having access to ethically sourced products, pleased to see your meal in beautiful vessels, and thankful to Hashem for the earth which provides these resources and opportunities.

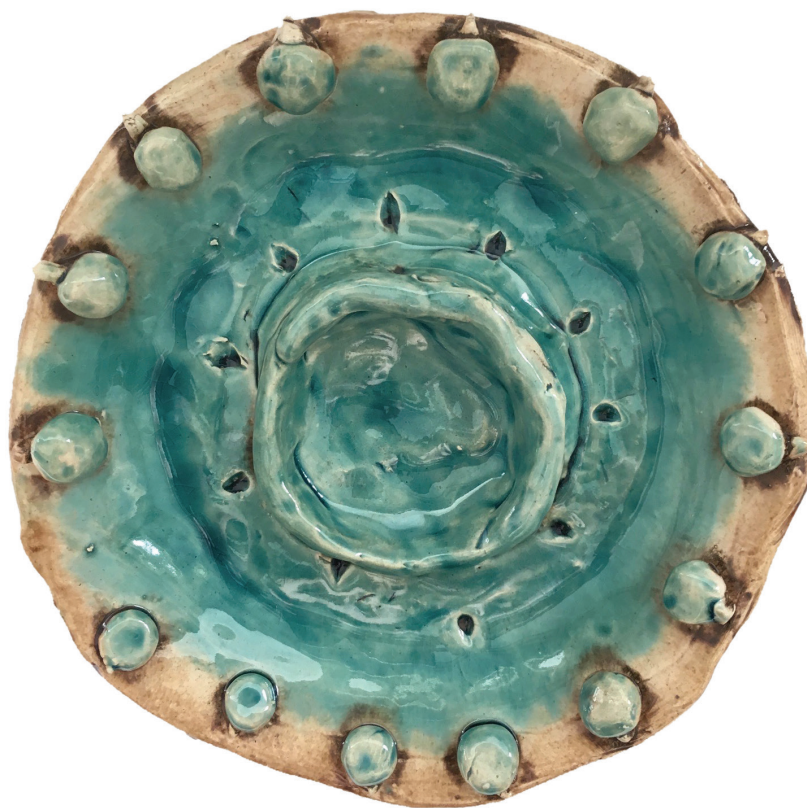
John Dewey, the American philosopher and educational theorist, believed in the positive potential of holistic education. Coincidentally, he once used nutrition as a metaphor to make his case. He wrote,

There is no such thing as educational value in the abstract. The notion that some subjects and methods, and acquaintance with certain facts and truths, possess educational value in and of themselves is the reason why traditional education reduced the material of education so largely to a diet of predigested materials.¹ To take the analogy further, we acknowledge that pre-digested food is suboptimal on two fronts: it delivers less nutrition and it requires less agency from the body in the digestion process. Likewise, to raise children who become healthy, well-rounded

human beings, Dewey advocated they ingest an education of thoughtfully integrated learning experiences that demand full attention and engagement.

As Grade 5 educators, when we teach about the connection between the environment, food, and the human body, we mirror the natural way in which children encounter food and nutrition. We engage all their senses, and a variety of learning modalities. The breakfast above offers a holistic approach to a morning meal, interrelating body, mind, environment, history/culture, religion, ethics, economics, and aesthetics. Digested together, they provide much food for thought.

The class examines the Jewish grace after meals, *Birkat Hamazon*, which includes the Hebrew phrase, “*V’Achalta V’Sava’ata u’Verachata*,” meaning you shall eat, you shall be satisfied, and you shall bless God (Deuteronomy 8:10). The words have wide-ranging implications and offer a multi-lens focus on what satisfaction means. They enable a deep and wide understanding of why and how we consume food for satisfaction. Are we more satisfied and ready to meet the day when gratified as much by our breakfast’s nutritional properties as we are by its ethics and beauty?



Our students analyze the meaning of satisfaction (*Sava'ata*) holistically. Studying the *Birkat Hamazon*, they find that Moses first spoke these words when he addressed the Israelites in the desert; the archetypal Jewish prayer, *Shema*, comes from the same speech. Moses explains that humans cannot be satisfied by bread alone (Deuteronomy 8:3), but require the kind of physical satiation achieved when food is consumed in conjunction with the spiritual, metaphysical, and emotional gratification found in words of Torah. The included prayer, *Nodeh Lecha*, adds thanks for freedom from slavery, for the Land of Israel, the covenant, the Torah, life, grace, and compassion, and, finally, for the food that we eat. We cannot thank God, nor appreciate our food, one in isolation from the other. Our Grade 5 students begin to make the connections.

Together we brainstorm to identify what satisfies us: eating good food and feeling full, making an effort and feeling pleased, accomplishing goals, enjoying aesthetic experiences (music, art, theatre), appreciating nature, refuelling our bodies through rest, and interacting with others. This exploration broadens perspective on what satisfaction means, and primes the topic for diverse applications.

In social and environmental sciences class, the students engage in a blind taste-test of organic and non-organic produce to compare the differences in taste and texture before they see the physical differences between the two vegetables. They learn about genetic and environmental modifications that food may undergo before reaching our plates, and the impact those modifications could have on our bodies. They investigate other ethical issues, such as fair trade, and discover that fair trade values align with Jewish values; this makes us responsible to attend to where our food comes from, how it grows, and whether those producing it are treated fairly.

The students research nutrients in foods and their effects on the major systems of the human body: the respiratory, circulatory, digestive, skeletal, and nervous systems. A correlating mathematics study of fractions, decimals, and percentages extends the inquiry into nutritional values and the implications of nutrition labels on packaging.

The students pursue independent research in language arts class, selecting a fruit, vegetable, grain, seed, or nut to study in depth. They generate questions about the food's source, growth patterns, nutritional value, cultural significance, ethical implications, and any Jewish connection. Dewey would be pleased to see the students engaging in authentic, holistic learning—independently they consume original sources and they produce a well-digested understanding of their food.

They carry their selected food into art class and work through a design process to create a ceramic vessel that will enhance satisfaction when it is used to serve their food. The students engage artistically with the food's shape, scale, texture, and function. They experiment and “play with their food,” stamping it into the clay to produce designs and



depths of texture. Ultimately, they carry home a material representation of their integrated learning.

Daily eating—like other habitual activities—can easily be taken for granted. When students consider the interrelationship of body, food, environment, ethics, and Judaism, the experience of eating becomes complex and has more meaning. Breakfast becomes a time for reflection, appreciation, and satisfaction, not simply a mindless routine. Selecting, preparing, serving, and eating food mindfully and holistically sees us nourish our bodies, minds, and hearts.

1 John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (1938; reprint, New York: Touchstone, 1997), p. 46.

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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.



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