

CURRICULUM SPOTLIGHTS Nº1

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INTEGRATED JEWISH EDUCATION AT THE TORONTO HESCHEL SCHOOL

GRADE
SIX

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.

Covering the Challah's Eyes

EMPATHY AND PERSONIFICATION

BY LESLEY COHEN

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

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

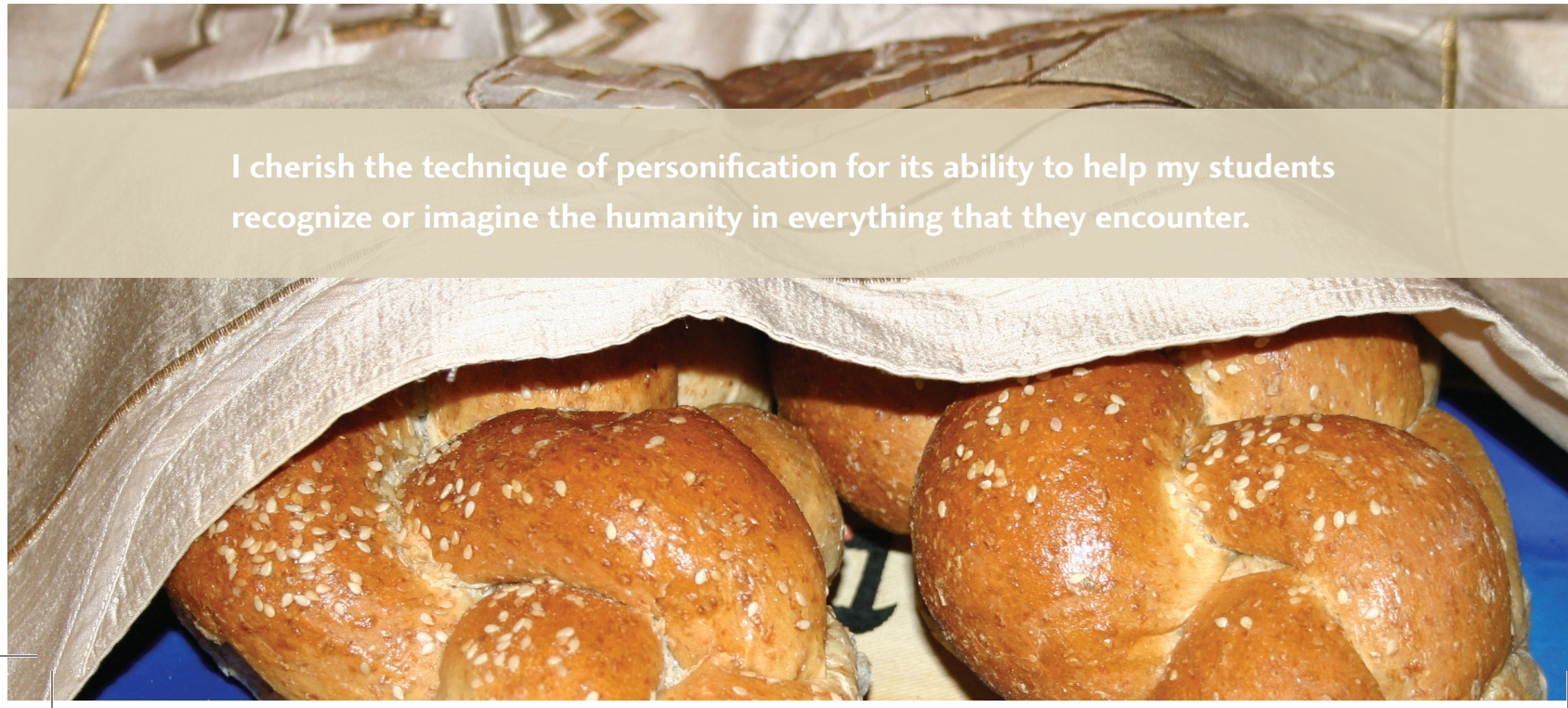
Every grade at The Toronto Heschel School begins its language arts curriculum in September with a poetry unit. This way, students begin their studies attending to expression, creative thought, and emotion, rather than worrying immediately about where to place a period or a comma. In Grade 6, we meet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

While these childhood examples hook the students into

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Students demonstrate themes from the Seder that resonate in environmental responsibility and action.



The Grade 6 Eco Seder

BY LISA RICHLER

Every year at the Passover Seder, families worldwide gather around the table to recount the Jewish journey from slavery to freedom. The Haggadah narrative winds its way through themes of bitterness, resourcefulness, renewal, and community. It's an annual reminder of our heritage, and it encourages us to accept personal responsibility for our safety today and freedom for future generations. But how does one teach these concepts to 11- and 12-year-old students? How do we convince children that this matters?

In Grade 6 at Toronto Heschel, the elements of the Passover Seder receive fresh significance through correlation to environmental issues. Canadian students in 2018 expect freedom to include life in a clean, sustainable environment. In the environmentally conscious culture of today, it's not too big a jump, especially at Toronto Heschel, for

students to feel personally responsible for taking care of the natural world. At the Grade 6 Eco Seder, students are heartfelt as they demonstrate to parents and friends that the themes of the Seder resonate in environmental responsibility and action.

In the months before Passover, each Grade 6 student chooses a particular step in the Seder, and relates it metaphorically or symbolically to an environmental topic that they will research. Some projects connect concretely; for example, *karpas* (כרפס, dipping and eating the greens), might inspire thoughts about the "greenness" of our food, or green spaces in the world. Others inquire into more abstract relationships; for instance, *tzafun* (צופן, the search for the hidden matzah), might inspire exploration of pollutants hiding in the environment. The students narrow down a research

focus and raise questions for an independent survey that they will create and examine in the data management unit of math class.

Grade 6 students might not easily relate to the bitterness of slavery, to the hardships that B'nai Israel endured, or the resourcefulness required to survive the journey to freedom. But looking through the lens of ecology, these concepts take on new resonance. One group of Heschel students explored *yachatz* (breaking), the part of the Seder when we break the middle matzah and put half aside for later. They explained that because B'nai Israel had to save some of their matzah for later, we also keep some of ours aside at the Seder, as the *afikoman*. The students explained that even though we are not slaves, and can live comfortably, we are responsible for saving our resources—agriculture, animals, water, food, forests—for the future. The story of B'nai Israel helps us understand that we must not take natural resources for granted.

The students also design and craft unique ceramic plates to illustrate:

1. the “step” in the Seder that they chose as their inspiration;
2. the science and ecological ethic that they explored; and
3. the four names of Pesach (Passover) that reveal the fullness of the Jewish idea of freedom: Chag HaHerut, celebrating liberation; Chag HaPesach, remembering sacrifice; Chag HaMatzot, acting flexibly in the push forward; and Chag HaAviv, noticing the rewards of spring.

What is amazing about this project is that when the students present their work to their families and school community, they demonstrate an incredible sense of agency over their findings. Simultaneous immersion in scientific research, Judaic interpretation, and community polling puts them at the centre of their own independent learning—the emergent self-confidence plus a zeal to share their discoveries and ideas are palpable. They present as experts who are explaining specific critical ecology, and they share their personal recommendations for change. This year, parents were introduced to topics ranging from the protection of endangered animals, to the hazards and benefits of forest fires, to sustainable farming.

What I love about the Eco Seder project is that it takes ephemeral concepts from the Hagaddah and brings them into the Grade 6 headspace. The students explore and experience core Jewish values. Through the Seder, they see the values at work in the world. The students are thinking like ethicists, scientists, Judaic scholars, and community participants all at the same time. It's well worth a celebration.

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Learning from the Masters

BY LISA SHEPS

After preparing the canvas, distinguishing light from dark, land from water, adding animals, plants, and more, God creates a human being, *ha'adam*, with characteristics that mirror the Divine, *B'tzelem Elohim*. "And God said, 'Let us make the human in our image, after our likeness'" (*Sefer Bereshit*, Genesis 1:26). What does this foundational declaration tell Jewish educators encountering their students? What does it imply for children's mindsets as they grow up strong?

What does it mean to be in an image we cannot see or comprehend? The Talmud explains, "The image of G-d is free will... Free will is a condensation of Godliness" (*Meshech Hochma*, *Bereshit* 7). It adds, "The term *in God's image* refers to an intellectual achievement. When the Torah uses the word *in God's image* [in Aramaic it's a single word] it was meant to alert us to the fact that the intellectual life-force within man has been emanated from God's own Holy Spirit" (*Rabbeinu Bahya*, *Bereshit* 1:27:1-2). God's creative force relates cognitive capacity, decisiveness, choice, achievement to be a reflection of the Divine. Likewise, our creativity should be the same.

So how can we help students to see themselves as progenitors, creators, lead actors in their own spheres? Our way at Toronto Heschel begins first and foremost in teaching through the arts. We assume that, *in the image of God*, each of our precious growing students possesses the kind of vast potential and unique spirit that lie at the heart of creativity. To prepare students in the exercise of free will, we structure classroom experiences that require them to practise how to perceive, how to absorb, how to evaluate, and how to respond. We train them in how to deploy the wit, wisdom, and individuality that comprise who they are. I will share how this unfolds in the art room and you will see that, at its essence, art is a deeply Jewish practice. To be functionally creative is to inherit and interpret the Divine.



Maimonides in *The Guide to the Perplexed* describes that what makes us *B'tzelem Elohim* is that, at our core, we are powerful and creative. We take this seriously at Toronto Heschel where the art room is a virtual laboratory for exploration, testing, and creativity. Through their artwork, students foray bravely into investigation, make connections, render decisions, and give life to new ideas.

Since the time of the Book of Genesis, artists have been creating non-stop, using their human eyes, intentions, and instincts to interpret what they see around them. We, the artists, can't hope to see the world through God's lens nor can we understand God's intentions, but our more limited perceptions do improve when we study the masterwork of artists and try to gaze through their skill and passion. We can imagine their intentions by comparing their expressions with others' works; we can try to look from their particular perspective; we can notice their inventions; and more. Master artists are simply individuals like us who share their thoughts and experiences through artistic choices and practised craftsmanship; their works are superb catalysts for student insight into all kinds of subject matter: the physical world, personalities, emotions, spiritual expression, historical happenings, or wild imaginings. Looking closely at master works of art, students develop a special kinship with creative work, and with God, the Creator.

From day one at Heschel, we are set up for students to notice, uncover, and understand statements made by a wide variety of master artists. We select artistic masters to serve as honorary Artists-in-Residence and provide inspiration and instruction in process, materials, and content as the students create and share their own works of art. We assist our children to forge the link that will connect what they feel inside with how they might express it in a clear and visual way. We wonder, What are they trying to say? How did they do it? What steps did they take? What came first? What materials did they use?

Senior Kindergarten children, age five, observe how Wassily Kandinsky expressed his emotions through colour and then they carefully select hues and shades to communicate *their own* feelings. They find it highly gratifying to produce something physical from what had been an idea in their head, and we see how the light of satisfaction in creative work switches on.

Another example is the Grade 2 exploration of the seven days of creation (detailed in THINK 24, Spring 2020). The text of *Sefer Bereshit*, the Book of Genesis, grounds the work and of course the Artist-in-Residence is God. In this way, the children meet creation as a concrete process and they discover how proceeding step by step can result in crafting

a new world before their eyes; they separate land from sky, earth from water; they add animals, birds, and fish. They are learning how to learn. It's formative and it renders the nature of Jewish education explicit: on their own canvas the children begin to interpret God's work.

In Grade 5, the Artist-in-Residence is textile artist Windy Chien, whose ordering of different knots in complicated hangings and rope sculptures narrates through the art of macramé. As students retell the Exodus story using strictures, bumps, and sudden openings in their complex weavings, I observe their wonderment, not to mention their surprise, that rope can provide an effective channel of communication and that each of the varied works of rope art reveals a different interpretation of the narrative—what was dire, what was free, which hurdles loomed big, what slipped free? Who knew what a length of rope might do?

An Artist-in-Residence also demonstrates what it means to have a particular point of view. Searching to understand a specific lens helps students to discern that particular filters reflect differently and often colour reality. Marc Chagall is an excellent Artist-in-Residence for this learning in Grade 6. He shares his life experience using biblical stories and characters made compassionately human and humane as frames of reference and students glean a sense of what life was like pre-World War I for this Russian Jewish boy. His surreal descriptions of shtetl life attune students to symbolism as a language in art and elsewhere. Their view of the world today may have different frames of reference and different symbols, but ideas of messaging hope, love, and tradition and how the world looks turned upside down comes through; how Chagall depicted his surroundings, fears, and hopes helps in examining their own.

One of our overall goals is to raise students to become strong critical thinkers, adept at clear-eyed perspectives in interpreting the world around them. When we instruct them to take note and consider the works of master artists, we are teaching them many goals: how to seek and respect expertise, what it means to have a point of view, and how to evaluate their own thought processes. These skills apply broadly: when they read a book, watch the news, or engage in conversation. It is my personal point of view that our young artist creators are well nurtured by looking thoughtfully to master artists, imagining what they were thinking, and reinterpreting with new eyes.

Perhaps envisioning through the eyes of master interpreters is the closest we can come to divining what truth may be. Nonetheless, we are *B'tzelem Elohim*, and it's incumbent upon us to proceed.

**Our young artist creators look thoughtfully to master artists,
imagining what they were thinking, and reinterpreting with new eyes.**



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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