

CURRICULUM SPOTLIGHTS Nº1

THiNK

THE
LOLA
STEIN
INSTITUTE
JOURNAL

INTEGRATED JEWISH EDUCATION AT THE TORONTO HESCHEL SCHOOL



GRADE SEVEN

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.

Big Ideas from Ancient History

BY CAITY LEHMAN



We turn to history to see how people in the past responded to their dilemmas.

I teach courses on ancient civilizations, but really, I am a teacher of big ideas. I help students recognize, frame, and fight for important values. In studying the ancients, we encounter themes that resurface as modern dilemmas. As we inquire into the meaning of our own lives and the societies we live in, we turn to history to see how people in the past responded to their dilemmas and questions. What meaning did they make of what happened to them? What patterns did they notice? How did they feel? What choices did they make? What values did they establish out of their experiences?

To learn history this way requires a specific lens from the start: we need to enter into our study with inquiring hearts and minds. When we read Torah with Senior Kindergarten (SK) students we ask, What patterns did we notice? How did we feel when we heard this narrative? What questions do we have? What would we want to do? By practising the art of asking these questions each time we read a new narrative, we develop cognitive and emotional skills that allow us to connect ancient stories with our own personal experiences; we lay the foundation for applying lessons to future situations.

For example, when SK students listen to the story of Abraham and Lot, they encounter an interesting problem. Both shepherds want to care for their animals, yet there is not enough grass to share. They need to find a solution. Through role play, visual cues, and practise, students experience what it feels like to be inside this problem and they brainstorm together for a solution. Acting out the circumstance makes it relatable and students are excited when they discover that, *thinking flexibly*, Abraham solved the problem with the suggestion that he and Lot share the pasture by each leading their animals along a different path through it.

To illustrate the importance of this lesson, we then act out situations in the classroom that might involve flexible thinking. For example, what happens when there is only one yellow marker but two students want to draw a sun? Students come up with an abundance of creative solutions, all of which are celebrated. Throughout the school year when students find themselves stuck, we teachers guide them back to flexible thinking. When students hear this message consistently, they notice the pattern and understand that thinking flexibly and conjuring new ideas works well in various situations. They come to see this biblical story as an illustration of finding a flexible solution, and that flexibility is universally valuable.

My Grade 7 students go deeper by exploring how big ideas interconnect across time. Does freedom promote innovation? Might loss enable growth? We study the Jewish experience in Hellenistic and Roman times, and consider how the notion of freedom was experienced in these different contexts. We contrast Jewish responses to adversity in different situations and reflect on how we might respond personally if we lost our freedoms today. We relate our own sense of freedom to that felt in antiquity, and see the notion of freedom as a concept across time. This is important in and of itself, but it also helps the story of ancient

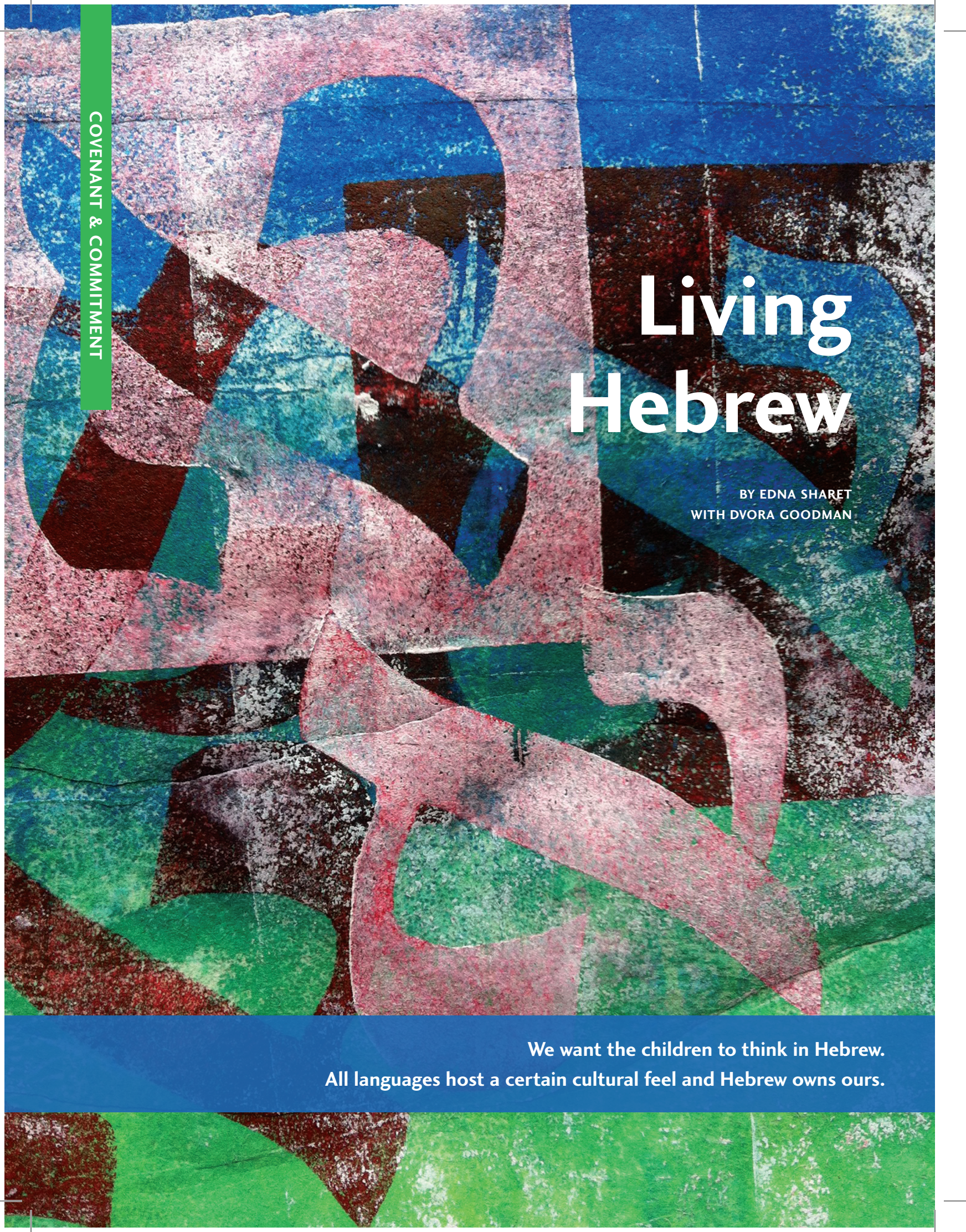
civilizations feel more relevant to Junior High students.

We begin by analyzing what we know about “freedom.” We play a “values game” where students prioritize ideals, beliefs, and attitudes from a given list. This is a challenging task as it is not easy to weigh safety, love, and justice, even hypothetically against one another, and it’s next to impossible to rank creativity, equality, health, and freedom. We task students in increasingly larger groupings to prune their lists of rankings, balancing divergent opinions, discussing and persuading. As they reflect on how their choices get influenced by others, they begin to articulate which values they consider indispensable and which they could compromise. As they envisage the impact of losing certain personal freedoms, a new comprehension dawns with respect to the various big ideas that are inherent in a healthy society. It’s a powerful thought exercise and leads to heated debates as students advocate passionately for their beliefs.

The class focus then shifts to historical facts. We study the Roman Empire and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, and we reflect on the Jewish experience when liberty was lost. Studying artifacts, artwork, architecture, and by reading texts by the first-century historian Flavius Josephus we begin to sense a story through the eyes of someone who lived it, to feel the nuance and impact of events. Without the Temple, the Jewish community had to adapt its spirituality; prayer became unlinked to a physical space. This brought about a significant change to Jewish identity, laying the foundation for the Rabbinic Era and diaspora. The class questions how we might respond to such hardship and what role might be played by the big idea of “adaptation.” We discover and discuss how, in the face of adversity, Judaism thrives from becoming adaptable and portable.

As the COVID-19 pandemic progressed in the early months of 2020, our community changed quickly. Facing new challenges, it was our turn to adapt our families, friendships, careers, and classrooms to new ways of living. During a remote learning semester in the spring, I felt that my students drew on their knowledge of Jewish response to loss in ancient times to help navigate their way. Seeing how our ancestors found new ways to learn, to pray, and to form community inspired us: it not only gave us a model for adaptation but also showed us that we can change and adapt without losing what is most important to us—learning, community, and relationships. In the virtual classroom, we discovered new ways to interact and learn, and found new opportunities for personal growth. In fact, it showed us that adapting is a way of thriving. We’re still here, just as before. We drew from wisdom that gives us strength to innovate: when Judaism adapts, it can thrive.

Caity Lehman is a passionate artist and traveller. After teaching for several years in Bogotá, Colombia, Caity is now in her third year at The Toronto Heschel School, teaching language arts and civilizations in Junior High. She studied English literature and film before pursuing a career in education.



COVENANT & COMMITMENT

Living Hebrew

BY EDNA SHARET
WITH DVORA GOODMAN

We want the children to think in Hebrew.
All languages host a certain cultural feel and Hebrew owns ours.

Hebrew is integral to our Jewish character. As a language, culture, and presence, it flows from the text that we study, the history we remember, and the ritual we practise. It is the rhythm of Judaism and the bridge that connects Jews worldwide. This premise that Hebrew is the expression of the Jewish people—verbally, culturally, spiritually, intellectually—drives The Toronto Heschel School approach to Jewish education. I have seen the strength it delivers to our students' sense of self and I am personally proud of their success in Hebrew fluency and literacy; they think and speak in Hebrew.

Imagine this interaction between a Hebrew teacher and a four-year-old child during the first week of school: The teacher crouches and, looking him in the eyes, speaks with him in Hebrew. The child has never before heard the language. He does not understand the words, but comprehends his teacher's body language and tone of voice; he sees what she points to as she speaks, realizing that she is asking him to throw the ball to her.

The challenge for teachers to speak exclusively in Hebrew to young students is not small; at first, the language divide feels like a barrier to their personal relationship. But it's not. It's nothing more than what we do at home with our babies who learn to talk through constant exposure and repeated practise. When teachers persist in Hebrew, success is abundant.

From day one Toronto Heschel Judaic teachers speak with their students exclusively in Hebrew. Proficiency depends on getting the language "into their ears and onto their tongues." The children first gather an understanding of the oral communication, then they begin to speak it themselves, and later they learn to read and write.

The teachers do not translate into English; it would block the ability to think in Hebrew. We want the children to think in Hebrew because there is something unique in how Hebrew conveys messages; all languages host a certain cultural feel and Hebrew owns ours. First of all, full meaning can get lost in translation, whether a missed subtlety of a thought or unseen poetry of an expression. Second, Hebrew is a root-based language and each word has a core matrix of three letters from which it evolves; the particular resonance that a well-chosen word brings to an idea or links it to other ideas comes through its root letters. For example, "shalom" can mean "hello," "goodbye," and "peace." Our children learn that the three root letters constitute the word "shalem," meaning "whole," and the holism of peace becomes apparent.

Speaking Hebrew or any language requires children to synthesize thoughts and phrases as they go about their day. It's a special hurdle in second-language learning in the early years. Our teachers continually expand their repertoire of techniques that elicit oral expression and encourage students to speak in Hebrew. The trick is to diversify activities but stay true to the principle that a good language program

benefits from a consistent approach year to year, such as adaptive games that work year to year with increasingly complex language lessons. By Grade 6, our students speak Hebrew using past, present, and future tenses; they express themselves comfortably and communicate in abstract concepts. We find that speaking Hebrew easily and comfortably is the path to proficiency.

At Heschel, we have this gratifyingly successful Hebrew program because we infuse the whole school environment with Hebrew. Some students never hear some teachers speak English and are surprised to learn years later that they can! As students walk through our halls, they meet teachers and friends, hear greetings like "Shalom!" or "Boker tov!" (Good morning) and "Ma nishma?" (What's up?), and instructions like "Bevakasha laamod bashura" (Please stand in line) and "Mi poteach et hadelet l'kulam?" (Who is opening the door for everyone else?). They hear Hebrew slang, which students meet in Grade 7 through film, music, and other Israeli material. The jargon includes "Al hapanim," which translates literally as "on the face," but, in common practice, means "just terrible!" One morning, I heard a student at his locker asking a friend in English how he found a recent test. The exasperated reply was, "Al hapanim!" I laughed and kept walking.

Hebrew also flows through classes that are not strictly Judaic studies. In Grade 6 math, when constructing sukkot, students follow Mishnaic instructions for measurements of *amot* and *tfachot*. When Grade 5 students read the novel *Underground to Canada*, classroom discussion references the Hebrew concepts of *avdut* (slavery) and *cherut* (freedom), integrating the students' concurrent study of Exodus and Jewish slavery; the language pulls both together.

Hebrew excellence begins with hiring. All Toronto Heschel teachers require a certain level of knowledge and comfort with the Hebrew language. Even if not teaching it, they are present in the classroom, especially in the elementary grades, and role model how Hebrew is spoken in a range of fluency. The school offers teachers weekly Hebrew classes with focus on oral skills; we are a school that sees teachers invest heart and soul in our students' learning and we invest in them.

It has become clear to us that commitment to intensive Hebrew language learning delivers great rewards. Yes, our students are confident learners who can meet the challenges of a second language with all the cognitive rewards that this brings. Yes, they participate in complex tasks in Hebrew and enjoy the full experience of this ancient modern language. But it's even more than this. For our students, Hebrew is a cultural happening that—all by itself—generates personal Jewish identity, a sense of belonging to a people, and an open pathway to our history, tradition, culture, and the modern State of Israel.

Edna Sharet is the Director of Junior High at The Toronto Heschel School.

Wrestling with the Invisible Self

A STORY OF STRUGGLE AND TRANSFORMATION

BY YARDEN BOURLAS

Every Wednesday morning, I lead a yoga session with about 20 Junior High students. We call it a *minyan* (the Hebrew designation for a circle of prayer) because our goal is to use three basic yoga skills—stillness, inward attention, and imagination—to explore and deepen our experience of *tefillah* (prayer). We focus on the prayer *Ashrei*.

Whenever I begin a new six-week session with a different set of students, I marvel at how easily and eagerly they pick up the ancient yoga techniques. These teenagers, who are constantly tempted by the escapism of screen time, and who guard vigilantly against doing anything that could be perceived as even remotely embarrassing, are surprisingly compelled by the various challenges that they encounter in the yoga *minyan*. It is as if they instinctively realize that the adventure of their life is underway, and they must reach inward for the *kavanah* (intention) that will help them to transform and triumph.

When Jacob wrestled with the invisible divine on the night before he was to encounter his brother, whom he had betrayed so many years before, the mysterious presence said to him, “Let me go, for the sun has risen.” But Jacob answered, “I will not let you go until you bless me” (Genesis 32:27). On the yoga mat, students can grapple with deep and previously hidden parts of themselves. Like Jacob, they hold fast to *kavanah* and persist in their practice and prayer. It is through the process of inward struggle that students become blessed with the resolve, courage, and wisdom needed to meet life’s challenges.

We begin our practice with stillness. I challenge the students to assume a yoga pose and to hold it while staying completely and utterly still. At first, this feels like a game, but I’m very serious. I urge them to feel as if they have been changed into a rock or a tree. When they hear the first line of the *Ashrei* prayer, their signal to assume a yoga pose, they move slowly, with focus and devotion, silently lifting their arms so as not to cause even the slightest sound, and eventually plant

their feet in a posture of their choice. I watch as each student settles into stillness and I find myself in a silent room surrounded by rocks and trees. I chant, “*Ashrei yoshvei beit-echa*.” From previous learning, students know that it means “Happy is the one who sits in God’s house,” and they take that as their cue to move out of their pose and sit with a tall spine. In this way they are enacting the feeling of *Ashrei*—of peace and contentment.

A quotation attributed to Rabbi A.J. Heschel reminds us that “self-respect is the root of discipline: the sense of dignity grows with the ability to say no to oneself.” When students take the stillness challenge and succeed—and all do—they send themselves a profound message of self-respect. Often, people tout mindfulness practice as a panacea for reducing anxiety because they think it is relaxing, but it might be more accurate to say that yoga and other mindfulness practices calm anxiety because they lead the way, through an often convoluted process, of coming to believe in yourself.

Once the students have mastered stillness, they are ready to practise the second skill: inward attention. I point out that, although silent and still, many students exhibit a tendency to look around the room, which tells me that their minds are wandering. They grin as they recognize themselves in this description. With the next line of the prayer, students assume a new pose with Jedi-like focus, eyes gazing forward calmly, as if they have been practising yoga for a lifetime. Of course, this is not easy. The temptation to look at the clock, to check if the teacher is watching, or to see what their friends are doing is almost unbearable. Like Jacob, they wrestle with an invisible force, battling to subdue the urges that tempt them to break their *kavanah* towards stillness and focus. Despite an outward appearance of composure, I know that the students are engaged in an internal struggle of biblical significance.

It is commonly thought that long, thin, bendable limbs are the key to a successful yoga practice, but true practitioners

know that the imagination is the most important faculty for yoga. The initial challenges of stillness and inward attention encourage students to slowly wade into the realms of their inner experience and prepare them to explore the most subtle and complex of the three yoga skills: imagination. As we chant each line of the *Ashrei*, we consider the words differently than we might in traditional prayer. With the word "*Gadol*," students assume a pose that makes them feel enormous, as wide as the world and infinite as the universe. With "*Hadar*," they take a pose that expresses beauty and grace, and when we say "*Tzadik*," they hold a posture showing wisdom. By physically enacting the words of the prayer, students come to a deep understanding of sophisticated Jewish concepts. Each pose is held in stillness, and no two poses are alike. Practising *tefillah* in this way encourages interpretation and stimulates imagination. It nourishes dormant seeds of creativity and can even make way for spiritual insights that were previously obscure.

By developing a relationship with deeper facets of the self through yoga and prayer, students encounter their passions and their fears. They cultivate their talents and refine their dreams. Joseph Campbell, scholar of comparative mythology, is well known for his quotation, "We're not on our journey to save the world but to save ourselves. But in doing that you save the world. The influence of a vital person vitalizes." Before Jacob could become Israel, patriarch of a great nation, he had to wrestle in the darkness and by himself. It is my aspiration that in our yoga *minyan*, students experience struggle, not as something to be avoided, but rather embraced as a crucial element of personal transformation.

Yarden Bourlas teaches Grade 8 science and art and oversees the environmental program at The Toronto Heschel School. While pursuing her master's in education, she specialized in student self-regulation. She has been practising yoga for more than 15 years.



On the yoga mat, students become blessed with the resolve, courage, and wisdom needed to meet life's challenges.



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
בית הספר על שם השל

LSI
THE
LOLA
STEIN
INSTITUTE