

CURRICULUM SPOTLIGHTS Nº1

THiNK

THE
LOLA
STEIN
INSTITUTE
JOURNAL

INTEGRATED JEWISH EDUCATION AT THE TORONTO HESCHEL SCHOOL



JUNIOR
KINDERGARTEN

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.

Learning to Solve Real Problems at Ages 4 and 5

BY DVORA GOODMAN

Consider this scenario: Noah and Rachel play side by side with blocks on the carpet of the Junior Kindergarten classroom. Accidentally, Noah knocks down Rachel's structure and she starts to cry. In return, she hides the unused blocks so Noah can't build anymore. What happens next is fascinating.

Noah tells Rachel that they need to go to the "conflict centre," and the two walk to the corner of the room where they proceed to use a set of conflict resolution tools to end their squabble. The tools consist of cards depicting emotions that the children select to show how the clash has made them feel, as well as a board that offers various options to resolve their disagreement, such as to apologize, talk it out, or to simply breathe deeply and relax.

Noah explains to Rachel that he is upset because she is hiding the blocks, and she responds that she got angry when he ruined her creation. They each apologize and decide to share the blocks but sit farther from one another to avoid more collisions. Then they return to the carpet and resume their activity.

This glimpse into how four-year-old children resolve problematic social interactions is not an isolated occurrence in the JK classrooms at The Toronto Heschel School, nor is it something that happens spontaneously. It's part of a highly intentional and detailed social and emotional learning curriculum for the Early Years; it also reflects the school's overall approach to social justice education.

Last year THINK launched a contest to discover and celebrate how teachers in other schools use their heritage, culture, or religion to inspire social justice values in their students. We were surprised not to receive any entries relating to students younger than Grades 7 or 8. I went into the Learning Centre to ask Heidi Friedman, Toronto Heschel's Director of Early Years (JK–Grade 1), when and how social justice learning begins for young children at The Toronto Heschel School.

Simply put, she explained that the way in which young children relate to one another and to the adults in their early lives grounds how they embrace the pursuit of social justice later in life. First, her students are helped to develop



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a positive sense of self and an awareness of their personal feelings. Next, they focus on compassion and building good relationships with their peers. And finally, they shift this awareness outside the classroom to the rest of the school.

When I heard Heidi describe this approach, I understood how important it is for this social and emotional focus to be part of the conversation about social justice education; it is the cement for the building blocks of everything to come. Core behaviours and values that are important for sophisticated social justice projects in higher grades are seeded and nurtured very early in the children's schooling.

Heidi described a few samples from the JK and SK programs. In early autumn, the Junior Kindergarten children study the Torah's description of the seven days of creation. They learn that on the second day, God separates light from darkness and gives each a name. The children apply this notion of distinctions to differentiating and identifying their feelings in different situations. They use emotion cards to name their feelings. Teachers maintain continual focus on each child's progress, pointing out when each seems to be expressing various emotions.

Once the children can articulate their feelings, they consider what it means to act on them in a responsible way. In mid-winter, a new JK overarching theme is introduced: "When we know our feelings, we can act responsibly." The theme works with the Jewish holiday of Purim that celebrates how a wise Mordechai and a courageous Esther saved the Persian Jewish community from the evil Haman who sought to destroy them. Reading the Purim Megillah, the ancient text of the holiday, and using it as a springboard, the teachers reinvoked the autumn learning and the children now identify the feelings of the characters in the Purim story. They have been practising all year!

They evaluate the actions of each Purim story character as a response to feelings, and they reflect on whether each was acting responsibly or not. For example, perhaps Vashti felt angry when King Achashverosh ordered her to come to his party, and perhaps this is why she did what she did. They discuss what she might have done and what might have happened next. The children draw up their own Megillah

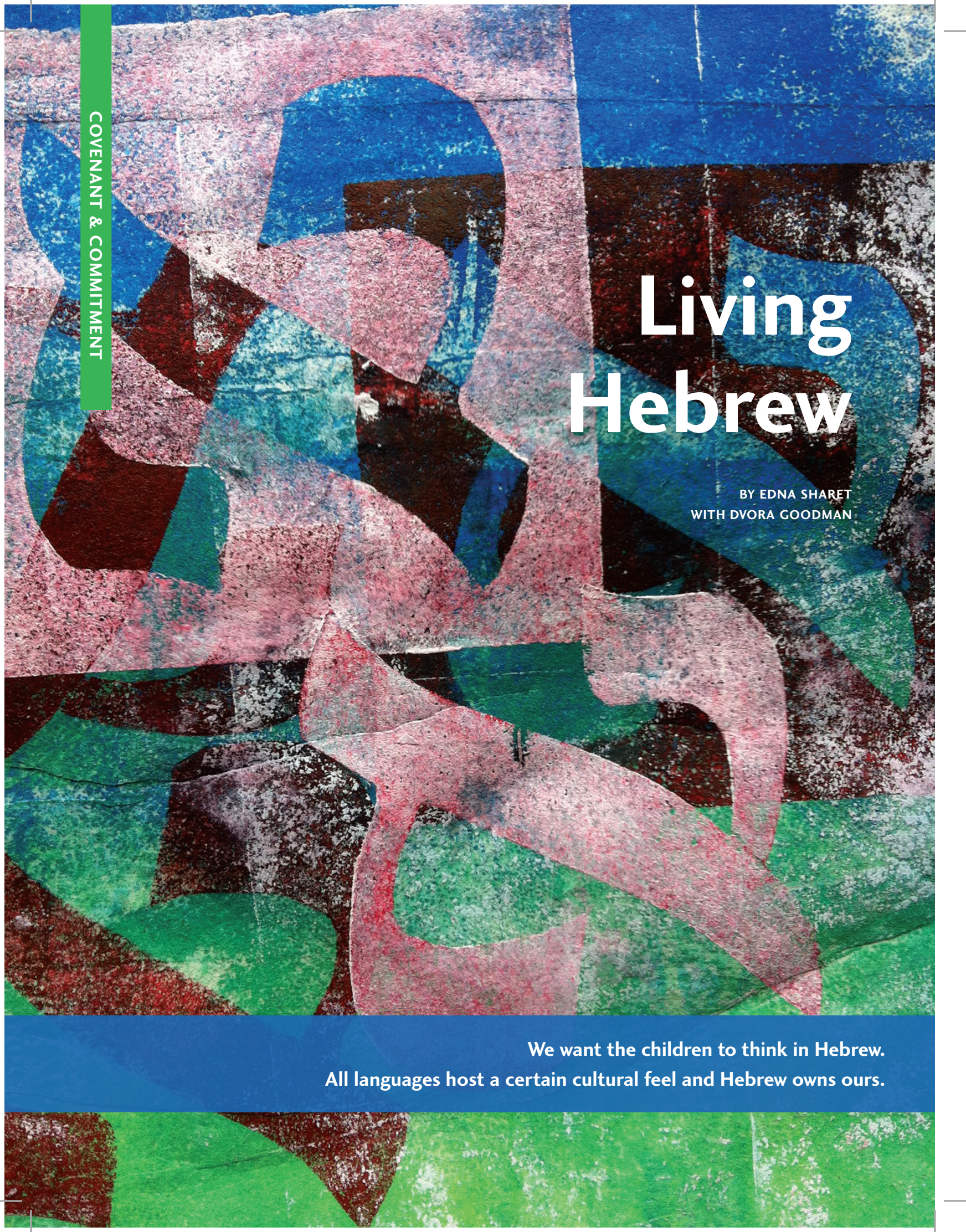
highlighting the Purim characters' feelings and actions as the narrative evolves.

The integration of social and emotional learning with Jewish studies continues in Senior Kindergarten. An integrated SK theme for Chanukah—the holiday that celebrates the Jewish resistance to attempts by the Syrian-Greeks to end their practice of Judaism—is that "Jewish practices and learning give strength to our *neshamah* (our soul)." Teachers describe the *neshamah* as a flame that is fed the oxygen it needs through acts of kindness and *mitzvot* (the commandments). The children consider what was happening to the *neshamah* of the Jewish people during the Greek occupation of Judaea at the time of the Maccabees. Did oppression nurture or dampen the flames of their souls? They reflect on how and when their own *neshamot* expand or contract.

In SK, when a child is sick and misses school, the class takes the time to call him/her on the phone with wishes to "get well soon." When the student returns to school, the teacher asks: "How did your *neshamah* feel when we called you?" Teachers ask their students how they might make a classmate's *neshamah* feel better if he/she seems upset. Through ongoing one-on-one conversations, teachers discuss with each child what he/she might do to make a difference in how someone feels.

Talking to Heidi Friedman reminded me of the awe that I always feel for the mastery of teaching kindergarten. Her curriculum shows how social justice learning—in its purest Jewish sense—gets a solid start when it begins early and is rooted tenderly and simultaneously in social-emotional and Jewish foundations. Esther saved her world through mindfulness and courage. Judah Maccabee won his day by caring for the souls of his community. And classmates feel better when they know they are missed. So begins the social conscience of the responsible thinkers and young activists who are nurtured at Toronto Heschel.

Dvora Goodman is the Coordinator of The Lola Stein Institute. She has worked for 20 years in a variety of Jewish educational settings and is a Toronto Heschel School parent.



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.

The Bounty of a School Garden

BY LISA RENDELY

In Rabbi Heschel's footsteps, our young gardeners learn that they must undertake duties and practise commitment if they are to sustain and share this phenomenon called Earth.

"Hey, wanna see something cool?" That's all it took for Daniel Abramson, then a new Grade 8 teacher, to get hooked. It was 2010 and Toronto Heschel School Co-Founder Ellen Kessler was in the school garden asking students to take in the wonder around them. The question struck him hard; Daniel saw a new departure for exploration. Now, as the school's lead environmental educator, he calls out the same question, that patch of ground still supporting limitless reflection.

The school's environmental ethos stems from an essential Jewish commitment to respect the earth. The garden mirrors the school's vision. It embodies commitment to integrated learning and is an organic extension of the academic and spiritual inquiry happening inside the school walls. The garden is a metaphor for the education we deliver.

It didn't sprout overnight. Like the rich learning at Toronto Heschel, the garden was planned thoughtfully, meticulously, and, above all, *intentionally*. The premise is the awe and wonder that ground the philosophy of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel; he is the school's namesake and mentor and he asks us to notice what we have, and ponder what we can do with it.

In the spirit of Rabbi Heschel, we are cognizant of the full load of responsibilities we carry: care for the earth, for each other, for Jewish values. The teaching is that, by fulfilling this trust, we come to recognize the fullness of our world. In Rabbi Heschel's footsteps, our young gardeners learn that they must undertake duties and practise commitment if they are to sustain and share this phenomenon called Earth. To this end, the garden generates awe and wonder, pride and delight in all its stewards, be they students, teachers, administrators, or families.

Commitment blossoms in myriad forms. For some, it's a weekly after-school gardening program to tend and weed, harvest the bounty, and put the garden to bed at season's end. A different kind of dedication appears as educators develop and teach interdisciplinary curriculum that weaves various kinds of learning into how and why our garden grows, from the botanical to the biblical to the business of seeds and layout, from the proverbial to the organic. Another flowering of commitment manifests when graduates return to witness the growth of a certain tree or check on flowers that they planted in class years earlier. However or wherever it shows, The Toronto Heschel School community can be characterized by its evolving dedication to the garden.

Like learning, the garden must take root, grow, and develop; only then can it flourish and bear fruit. Each grade's curriculum integrates learning from the garden across academic disciplines. In the garden, the children enact the values we teach by experiencing the learning physically, using new tools, and getting their hands dirty; they blend universal knowledge with spirituality.

Greg Beiles, Head of School, sees Jewish education fuse with environmental education and works with teachers to design purposeful opportunities that integrate the two. The garden is a case in point. Greg looks for where students might find a moment of awe and for how this unconventional learning setting might spark wonder in their eyes. While curiosity fosters children's love for natural science, Greg also brings Junior High students outside to encircle a large willow tree as an ideal setting to recite *tefillah* and connect with God amid God's creations.

Take, for example, the bees living on the roof of the Junior Kindergarten (JK) classrooms. They have become a school symbol of commitment to ecology. Learning from the Book of Genesis about the days of creation, Grade 1 children study the complex theme that creations combine to form new creations. To make honey, bees (one of God's animal creations) pollinate the flowers (sown on day three) which then grow, helped by sun and water (days three and four). The honey is harvested and enjoyed by humans, but only after it has had time to rest (day seven). First-hand experience with bees deepens the children's understanding of the miracles of creation.

Beth Lawrence is a parent volunteer, a professional gardener, and a landscape artist. She professes commitment to growing "the physical and metaphysical garden." One year, she levelled the earth to start fresh and, doing so, refreshed enthusiasm among faculty, students, and parents. Official Provincial Flowers now grow in the Grade 4 section, enhancing study of the Canadian provinces; a herb garden connects in a special way to Grade 2; and JK students plant potatoes one year, and harvest them the next, for delectable latkes on Chanukah.

Beth leads the garden club, which fertilizes meaningful relationships between children and the garden as well as interpersonal relations between families and friends. Shared duties establish collaboration and strengthen bonds within the school community. As parents and grandparents play and work with their children among the vegetables and flowers, Beth notices the older generations taking pleasure in teaching, appreciating the chance to leave their young with lasting knowledge of the world, personally delivered.

Daniel Abramson introduces Grade 7 students to the joy of the unknown; they plant a tree whose fruits they will not see as students, but know it will benefit generations to come. Planning for the future means cultivating today for the good of someone else tomorrow.

Daniel teaches about earlier inhabitants of the land that is this garden. His Grade 8 students read the *Truth and Reconciliation Act* and, in 2015, planted a First Nations Healing Garden of traditional medicinal plants. The class annually harvests tobacco and sweetgrass and welcomes First Nations educators to receive them as gifts. As Grade 8 at Toronto Heschel blends Torah themes with human rights, civil rights, and social action from September to June, the



Healing Garden is a hands-on anchor to year-long discussion; students perform concretely useful deeds for the benefit of others, through commitment, not obligation.

Rabbi Heschel wrote,

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.¹

The Toronto Heschel garden is an invitation to take in wonder and be amazed. It sees children explore, play creatively, smell flowers, and measure an asparagus stalk; their horizons expand. How lucky to have this garden. How lucky that our students plant their roots among those of sunflowers, kale, peonies, and fruit trees and, like them, blossom over the course of their years at the school, experiencing awe and wonder time and again.

¹ Rabbi A. J. Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976).

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 her art and design background into her daily classroom teaching.



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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