

CURRICULUM SPOTLIGHTS Nº1

THiNK

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INTEGRATED JEWISH EDUCATION AT THE TORONTO HESCHEL SCHOOL



SENIOR 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.



Curiosity and Wonder in the Early Years

BY SIGAL COHEN AND SARI HERSON

Sticky fingers
 Look at that!
 Muddy pants
 What is this?
 Looking closer
 Why is that?
 Outside searching
 I think I know!
 Listening quietly
 Can I try?
 Wondering, conjecturing
 But why is that so?
 I want to know.

Children are natural scientists. As babies they test for object permanence—fascinated by the reappearance of a face in the game of peekaboo; as toddlers, they engage in experiments, loving to see how water splashes or knocking objects down to see how they fall and roll. Through a proto-scientific method, children discover that hot means hot and that if they squash a beetle, it's not coming back. They learn that it doesn't feel good to crash towers they build and it's not fun to lose or damage playthings. Once they start to speak, they ask a million questions.

In the Early Years program at The Toronto Heschel School we help our young scientists develop their natural-born scientific habits of heart and mind. We begin with open-ended exploration that evolves into more formal modes of scientific investigation. During their outdoor explorations, students investigate the school's green space and garden at their leisure, searching for tiny creatures and observing new growth and seasonal changes. As educators, we nurture the scientific mindset by supporting their curiosity, encouraging them, and supplying a scaffolding of skills that enable the young students to delve deeper and answer questions they didn't know they had.

One spring afternoon a student approached a teacher, pointed to what he had found lying on the soil of a garden bed, and asked curiously, "What is this?" Numerous students gathered around asking more questions. Through investigation, the group came up with a hypothesis for what it could be. They determined, after close observation and bringing it to their noses, that it was a sprouting garlic clove which should have been deeper in the soil. The children replanted it and watched it during future explorations.

Some scientific habits of heart and mind—curiosity and wonder, creativity and inspiration—occur in young children naturally; others, such as responsibility, self-regulation, and organization, must be learned and developed. Research by leading psychologists, such as Roy Baumeister, now shows, “that the ability to self-regulate is essential to the development of the learning skills and work habits that are critically important to student success throughout the grades.”¹ Self-control, systematic thinking, order, and respectful collegiality must partner with exploration and curiosity.

Science is the domain of the curious. It is the investigative approach to the physical world, and yet it is only as valuable as its competency to test for reliable answers. Without regulated systems and order, exploration is simply fun.

To develop young scientists, we have *toranut* in our Early Years classroom. The classroom is our laboratory. It’s where we learn, and it requires our care and attention. The Hebrew term *toranut* translates as “tour of duty,” but is used commonly at summer camps for kitchen duties and cleanup. We use it to denote students’ classroom responsibilities. Like good scientists, they learn to behave responsibly in their lab, working well with their peers, and taking care of their supplies and the environment in which they learn.

Through *toranut*, our students, like scientists, learn to be attentive and systematic in how they interact with their surroundings, including in the lab. The children receive their *toranut* jobs and participate in organizational systems of the classroom, such as turning off the lights as we leave a room, watering our indoor plants as needed, and taking the compost to the outside garden bin.

Our overall curriculum is designed intentionally in ways that help our young scientists develop their researcher identities. For example, an overarching theme across the Senior Kindergarten curriculum is “Communication happens in many ways. When we listen and watch carefully, we can learn new ways to communicate.” The art and craft of scientific thinking flows from communication: science asks what is the world telling us? Looking, noticing, and inquiring are important scientific practices as well as skills for communication.

To discover how nature communicates, the students take clipboards and paper outside. Examining the willow tree, its trunk, bark, branches, and aerial roots, they notice the texture, the earth, and the creatures nearby. They make detailed

sketches and come away with questions about the root system and soil, “How deep do the roots go? Is there water underground? Will the roots reach the school? Why is there moss on the tree? What animals live here?”

To answer their inquiries, we model and apply the scientific method. We might investigate, for example, the soil. The children learn that they can hypothesize based on their experiences with gardens at home or at school. Some may know that, in soil, one might find worms, ladybugs, dead leaves and branches. We experiment, mixing water and soil in a jar and, observing closely, discover the various characteristics and contents of soil. To take it wider, we compare the properties of our school’s willow tree with an acacia tree in the Arava Desert in Israel. We learn that the same questions bring different answers in different places. And the questions and connections continue.

When children can apply their natural curiosity and learn scientific practices to a hands-on project, an appreciation for the power of science blossoms. Gardens are the perfect research spot for young children. In the spring, Toronto Heschel’s outdoor space is primed and ready for planting and our Senior Kindergarten students dig into the dirt, planting sunflower seeds in the school’s learning garden. (Sunflower seeds grow quickly and can be checked on frequently for rapid changes!) The students visit the gardens often, measuring plant growth and journalling their observations. Once again, the process prompts many questions. The children ponder the impact of weather and precipitation on soil conditions and sunflower growth. They reflect and hypothesize what they might find in the garden tomorrow.

Together, students and teachers witness and celebrate their plants’ growth from tiny seeds to flourishing sunflowers that reach for sun and sky. Just as the school year ends, and our young students ripen into budding scientists, so do our sunflowers. As educators, we hope our students apply scientific thinking to everything they encounter, whether they are at school, at home, or at camp, or in nature.

¹ R.F. Baumeister and K.D. Vohs, *Handbook of Self-Regulation: Research, Theory, and Applications*, 2nd ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2011).

Sigal Cohen and **Sari Herson** are Early Years teachers at The Toronto Heschel School.





100 Hebrew Words a Day

BY DVORA GOODMAN

Colourful paper cutouts stick to the door of the Senior Kindergarten (SK) classroom. Shaped like hands, each bears a short English word such as “AND” or “IN” or “THE.” As they enter, the children slap the words with a “High five,” saying “Hi, AND” and “Hi, THE.”

My son followed the routine for weeks and I watched the small words change and rotate. Then one day he raised his hand and paused. When he resumed his routine, he was happily greeting letters of the Hebrew alphabet, “Hi, ALEPH, Hi, BET.” Then, again a pause as something twiggled. He switched to “Shalom, ALEPH. Shalom, BET” and scampered inside. I love this moment because it demonstrates a five-year-old’s

capacity to feel the natural flow of a second language; he could not say hello to an aleph. It warrants “Shalom.”

Learning to speak a second language is not easy. Literature about language acquisition describes “understanding” as a passive skill that is more easily mastered than the active skill of speaking. In school environments, while many students can understand a second language, it is a great feat to get the children to speak and speak well. As such, The Toronto Heschel School issued a challenge to its teachers—all of them, from Junior Kindergarten (JK) to Grade 8: Have your students speak 100 Hebrew words every day!

I interviewed my son’s SK Hebrew teacher, Morah Maya

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Lazovski, and watched her tackle the challenge. She follows the basic rule to never speak to her students in English and creates a completely immersive Hebrew environment. Morah Maya is intentional and explicit about her goals with her young students. She imbues the sense that second language learning is not only about mastering a language, it's about self-challenge. Some of the children can say single Hebrew words, some can speak in two-word statements, and some can string more words together. No matter how many words they are comfortable using, they have to commit to adding one more. That's her challenge to them.

She is open and articulate about the risk-taking that is involved in students' assumption of this challenge, and removes any fear of shame that may come with making mistakes. For example, when a student hesitated to speak, Morah Maya, who is Israeli, said to her in front of the class in Hebrew, "Do you laugh at me when I say something wrong in English? We won't laugh at you. It is okay to make mistakes, but you need to try." The disarming statement was all this little girl needed to hear to help her make the effort and attempt to speak in Hebrew. Morah Maya is the kind of teacher that children want to please. She jokes, laughs, and plays with her students. However, she is also strict and demanding. I saw that, when she praised this little girl by saying *Kol hakavod* (an expression meaning "good job"), it meant the world to her.

One hundred words a day requires careful thought. Morah Maya is a master of the mnemonic; she has teaching systems, patterns, and associations that foster speaking Hebrew. Her students experience, experiment with, and exude each new word she gives them. First they articulate it clearly, then they shout it, whisper it, clap the syllables, say it to a friend on the right, then to a friend on the left, always with a hand motion, gesticulating the meaning of the word.

Another tactic is repetition through play. The children become familiar with a game, that is, what you say when you're rolling the dice, landing on a certain square, or running across a field (for example, *Ani zoreket kubiah kechulah*, meaning "I am throwing a blue die," and *Ani roeh shtayim*, meaning "I see the number two"). When games learned in September are played in May, with new vocabulary slotted in, the kids play boisterously, fully in Hebrew.

The repetition of Hebrew phrases is also useful for storytelling about the Jewish holidays and Torah. My son came home at Purim time in March relaying to me parts of the Purim Megillah completely in Hebrew. I asked Morah Maya how he was able to do this, and she explained how she used

scripts repeatedly in differing ways. The repetition let my boy feel comfortable to tell me the story in Hebrew. A simple SK script might be: *Ani Achashverosh. Yesh li keter al harosh* ("I am Achashverosh. I have a crown on my head"). The class had practised this statement in many ways, such as going around a circle with each child repeating the sentences; conversing in pairs; and finally, in costume, performing the Megillah scenes.

Music also works magic for memory. The class sings at least three Hebrew songs daily; some are built into routines, such as singing "*Shalom, ma nishma?*" ("Hello, what's new?") while others connect to the learning unit. Studies have uncovered that language acquisition is strengthened by moving your body while learning a language, and Morah Maya's songs have corresponding movements.

I saw the class play a quick movement game where each child in the circle would stand and say the letters in the aleph-bet sequentially—almost in a wave. The letters were displayed on the wall for them to reference. The exercise took three minutes and then they sat down, fresh and ready. Another fun movement occurs when children do a good job of something; Morah Maya has them pat themselves on both shoulders and say aloud "*Kol hakavod*—good job."

Morah Maya wants her students to be conscious of the techniques and reminders that can help them speak their Hebrew. For example, when I was in the class visiting, she was explaining that earlier someone had asked how to say "tree trunk" and she reminded them that they knew because it was in their song about trees. The children immediately started singing and doing the corresponding hand motions, and in the lyrics I heard all the parts of the tree. There are also cues on the classroom walls, such as words and pictures. If all these are not enough, the children know how to ask for help. A boy stumbled when trying to speak, and Morah Maya offered, "*Ata tzarich ezra? Az tagid, 'Ani tzarich ezra'*" ("Do you need help? Then say to me, 'I need help.'") The help sometimes comes from her and sometimes from his friends.

Morah Maya, with her colleagues at Toronto Heschel, are launching JK and SK children into the rigorous language training they continue to receive as they grow up grade to grade. Have you been counting—did they say 100 words?

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

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).

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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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