

№29 / FALL 2021

THiNK

THE
LOLA
STEIN
INSTITUTE
JOURNAL

Conversation about Education, Ethics, and Our Children

THE ORDINARY AND EXTRAORDINARY EVERY DAY

LEARNING FROM THE MASTERS: CREATORS IN THE IMAGE OF GOD / THE SIDDUR AS
SONGBOOK FOR THE SOUL / DAYS FILLED WITH NATURE, GRATITUDE, AND PRESENCE OF MIND /
NIGHTS FILLED WITH LOVE / THE TIMELY AND THE TIMELESS IN ISRAEL EDUCATION

LOLA STEIN INSTITUTE JOURNAL TEAM

EDITOR
Pam Medjuck Stein

ASSOCIATE EDITOR
Ava Kwinter

COLUMNISTS
Gail Baker
Greg Beiles
Tziporah Cohen
Dvora Goodman
Ava Kwinter
Lisa Richler

ADVISORY TEAM
Esther Berry
Ellen Ostofsky
Lisa Sheps
Nancy Marcus

LOLA STEIN INSTITUTE
Chair, Pam Medjuck Stein
Vice Chair, Michelle Shulman
Director, Greg Beiles
Coordinator, Dvora Goodman

COPYEDITING & PROOFREADING
Beth McAuley / The Editing Company

DESIGN AND LAYOUT
Sharon Kish / www.sharonkish.com

The Lola Stein Institute is the research and publication arm of The Gesher Abraham Foundation. Under this umbrella, the integrated Jewish studies espoused by The Lola Stein Institute are delivered at The Toronto Heschel School, a Jewish day school in Toronto, Canada.

www.lolastein.ca
www.torontoheschel.org

If you have any questions or comments, or to receive THINK at your school or home, please write us at info@lolastein.ca

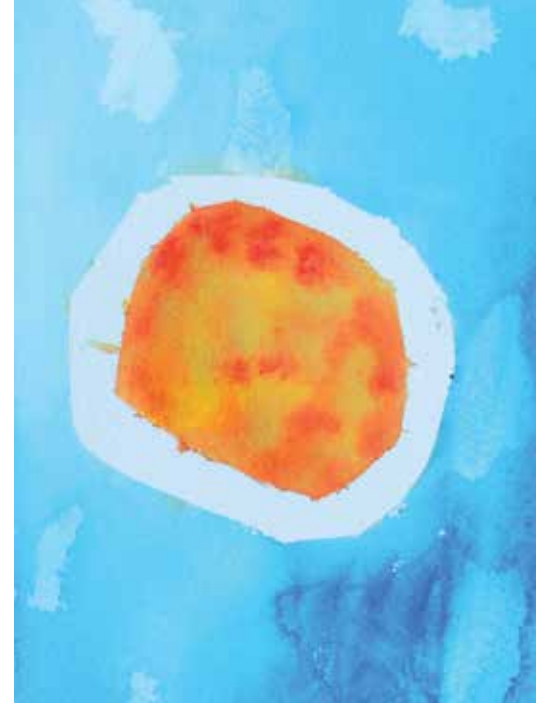
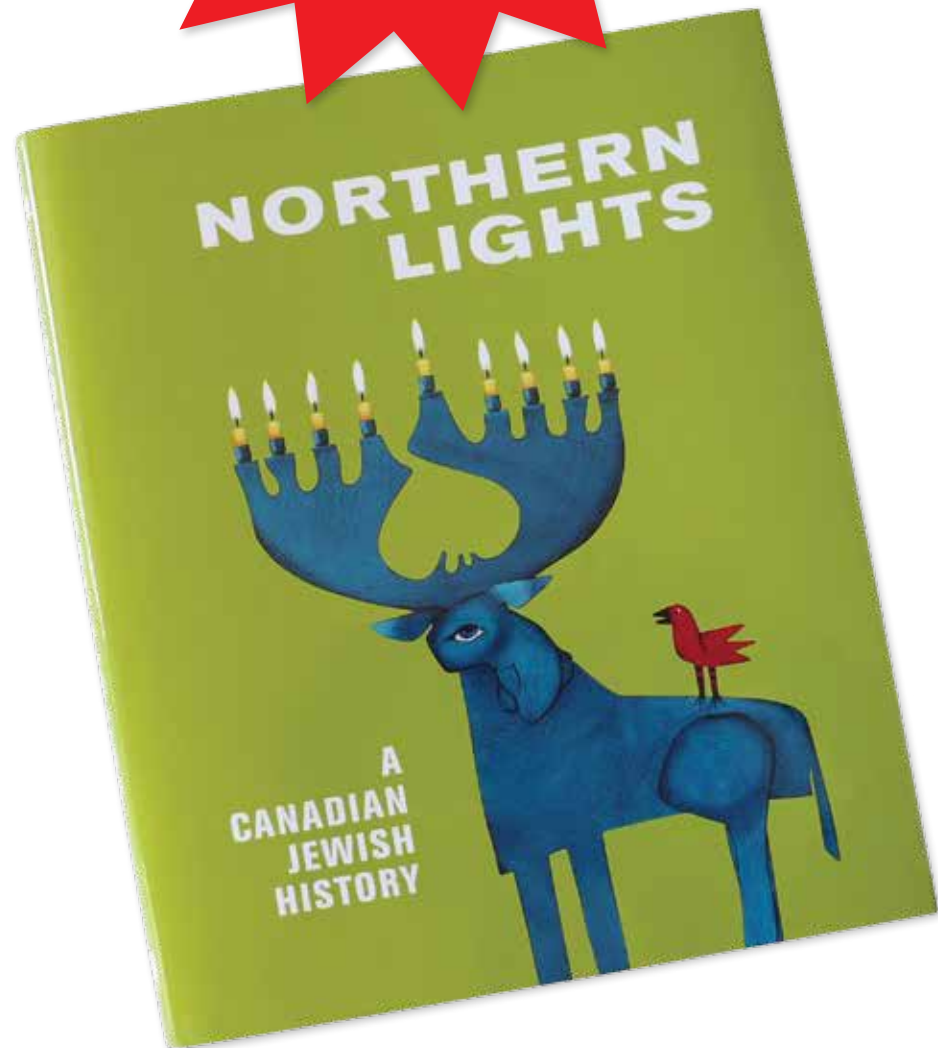
© 2021 Lola Stein Institute, Toronto, Canada. All rights reserved. No portion of this magazine may be reproduced, copied or reused in any way without written permission from The Lola Stein Institute.



Lola Stein z"l was an early female pharmacist in South Africa, but her special talent was in hospitality and friendship. She cared for family and friends, at home and abroad, individually, uniquely, and lovingly. We honour her memory in a way that also reaches out to many. We lovingly remember Mannie Stein z"l whose enthusiasm and support for our work with children is gratefully acknowledged.



Northern Lights: A Canadian Jewish History tells stories of Canada through the legacy of its Jewish citizens.
Limited copies are available for purchase on our website: www.torontoheschel.org/northern-lights



RISE & SHINE

4

EDITOR'S DESK

The Ordinary and Extraordinary

6

AWE & WONDER

Jewish Songbook of the Soul

Dr. Greg Beiles

8

מוֹדָה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ
I Give Thanks to You

Daniel Held

10

Here I Am! Hineni!

Rabbi Joseph Kanofsky

WORK & PLAY

14

Learning from the Masters

Lisa Sheps

16

Let's Prescribe Nature

Erin Silverstein

18

LEARNING CENTRE

The Timely and the Timeless in Israel Education

Dvora Goodman

REST & REFLECT

24

MODERN TIMES

The Bedtime Hour

Ava Kwinter

26

Good Books

Gail Baker and Tziporah Cohen

28

BOOK REPORT

No Vacancy
by Tziporah Cohen

MIDDLE-GRADE NOVEL

Lisa Richler

30

SPOTLIGHT

Heschel Natives

MORAH ANDI SPRING AND
MOREH AIDEN ORZECH

Ava Kwinter

CONTRIBUTORS

Gail Baker is an educator, mother, and grandmother. She co-founded The Toronto Heschel School in 1996 and retired in 2014 as Head of School.

Greg Beiles is Head of The Toronto Heschel School and Director of The Lola Stein Institute.

Tziporah Cohen is a psychiatrist with an M.F.A. in Writing for Children and Young Adults and a former Toronto Heschel parent. Her novel, *No Vacancy* (Groundwood Books, 2020), was a Sydney Taylor Book Award Honor Book and a National Jewish Book Award finalist in the middle-grade category.

Dvora Goodman is Coordinator of The Lola Stein Institute. She works as a Jewish education consultant in a variety of settings.

Daniel Held is the Chief Program Officer at UJA Federation of Greater Toronto, leading a team that strengthens the Toronto Jewish community through education, human services, and other vital programs ensuring the vibrancy and vitality of the community. A lifelong educator, Daniel holds a doctorate in Jewish education and was both a Wexner and Mandel Fellow. Daniel and his wife, Arielle, are the proud parents of two students at The Toronto Heschel School and of another one who looks up to her older sisters.

Rabbi Joe Kanofsky, Ph.D., earned a Doctorate in Comparative Literature from Boston University. He was ordained at the Rabbinical College of America where he was a Wexner Fellow. From 2001 to 2004 he was Director of the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation in Poland and currently serves as Rabbi of Kehillat Shaarei Torah in Toronto.

Ava Kwinter studied English Literature at McGill University, Queen's University, and the University of Ottawa. She's a parent at The Toronto Heschel School.

Lisa Richler, M.A., B.Ed., OCT, is a certified teacher in private practice, specializing in individualized instruction and academic support in reading, writing, public speaking, and study skills. For seven years, Lisa led the admissions and marketing team at The Toronto Heschel School. She and her husband are the proud parents of two Heschel graduates and a current Heschel student.

Lisa Sheps teaches visual art at The Toronto Heschel School. Trained as an architect, Lisa then received her Master of Teaching. She wove together her past experiences with her additional training by conducting research on art-integrated education. She recently completed the Teacher Leadership Program through Brandeis University and the Legacy Heritage Foundation.

Erin Silverstein spent much of her time, before having children, working in urban forestry as a consulting arborist, tree tour leader, and tree planter with LEAF (www.yourleaf.org). The rest of her time was spent hiking or paddling while exploring the forests surrounding Ontario's lakes and rivers. Erin and her family have recently relocated to Whistler, BC (for the time being), where they have renewed a great passion for outdoor education and adventure.



The Ordinary and Extraordinary

EDITOR'S DESK

Wading through autumn leaves and school corridors, it's time for a Heschelian flip. Let's look not at a daily schedule but at the matrix of Jewish values that construct it. Amidst the repeating, same old, day-to-day fare lies a big surprise: frames of reference that safeguard children's creativity and freedom. It's all about *seder hayom*, the order of the day.

Routine activities are sometimes called humdrum. Like itty-bitsy and teeny-weeny, humdrum doubles a sound to give more meaning. Repetitions in daily life also do double duty; they organize time and they engineer a child's physical and spiritual maturity. Juxtaposing the ordinary and the extraordinary can prepare children to think laterally, notice relationships, and optimize possibilities. Inviting students into the mysteries of the world galvanizes everyday learning with enthusiasm to spare. It's the essence of awe and wonder and its pursuit is spirited by Jewish wisdom for when we do what and how we do it.

We plan the day with context, aiming to be soulful, grateful, and ready. In his column, *Awe and Wonder*, Greg Beiles describes the pervasive and underappreciated presence of poetry and music in Jewish tradition; centering on their intrinsic power, he cites care for a child's soul as core to the Jewish day. In the morning, we say *Modeh Ani*, the prayer of thanks; Dan Held shares his gratitude at hearing his children express theirs over Zoom each morning during the pandemic and notes research in the psychological benefit of thankfulness. Then, on to meet the day, alert and prepared to seize the moment: Rabbi Joe Kanofsky explains the stance

of readiness incumbent on Jews since first Abraham then Moses uttered, "*Hineni*" (here I am) and married courage to humility.

Senior art teacher, Lisa Sheps supports students to understand what it means to be created *B'tzelem Elohim* (in the image of God); as they identify with the Creator and learn to how to learn from experts, students' individuality, confidence, and initiative blossom. In *The Learning Centre*, Dvora Goodman discloses another daily orientation which is the multifaceted connection between Jews and the State of Israel; in fostering that link, teachers find it helpful to differentiate between what is timely and what is timeless in that relationship. In yet a third steady values proposition, Erin Silverstein shares personal experiences and recommendations for inspiring children to treasure and explore nature.

Jewish tradition holds that new days begin at sunset. Ava Kwinter, in her column, *Modern Times*, reconsiders quiet togetherness at bedtime and all that evenings with our children can mean. In *Book Report*, Lisa Richler reviews *No Vacancy*, Tziporah Cohen's prize-winning, middle-school novel where ordinary situations culminate in extraordinary combustion. Cohen co-authors, THINK's *Good Books* column with Gail Baker; their selections this time are books featuring positive attitudes and self-care.

The mechanism behind a clock face is what keeps the time. Take a peek inside. The ordinary and the extraordinary are both there.

Pam

Jewish Songbook of the Soul

BY GREG BEILES

Question: What do Simon and Garfunkel, Carole King, Leonard Cohen, Naomi Shemer, and scribes of the Hebrew Siddur all have in common?

Answer: They understand that souls love poetry and music. Song delivers spirit and spirit delivers song.

Daily prayer may rank among the least understood and least appreciated of Jewish practices. For many, it feels irrational to request God to intervene in daily affairs. With the availability of on-demand delivery through Amazon Prime, what do we make of the call of a prayer that has neither a guaranteed delivery date nor time stamp. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel says this:

The primary purpose of prayer is not to make requests. The primary purpose is to praise, to sing, to chant. Because the essence of prayer is a song, and man cannot live without a song.¹

For Rabbi Heschel, prayer is a fundamental human pursuit; one of the core activities that define us as human beings in the same way that singing and art do. We pray whether we realize it or not, because, like song, prayer bubbles up from our needs, hopes, and desires; it vocalizes our deep urge to express and be heard. John Lennon's awedly secular song "Imagine" is, in essence, a prayer. Likewise, so many songs.

Biblical prayers—from our infancy as a people—are pure song; they are cries, calls, and exaltations of joy: God "heard the cry of the Israelites" suffering in Egypt (Exodus 3:7); as exiles returning from Babylon, our "mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy" (Psalms 126); the prophet Jonah "called out" to God from beneath the waves of the sea (Jonah 2:3).

When I pray with my students, we explore these visceral roots of prayer. On waking, the prayer is *Modeh Ani*, an acknowledgement of being alive, a recital of thanks for our *neshamah*, our breath. We begin with mindful breathing, then add words by literally "breathing" out phrases of the prayer on each exhalation: inhale, exhale: *modeh/modah ani* (I thank...), inhale, exhale: *lefanekha* (in your presence) ... and so on. Form conveys meaning: we use our breath to express thanks for our breath. Afterwards, we stretch and yawn loudly. I tell my students, "A yawn is also the first prayer of the morning; even before our minds are fully awake, our body prays thanks for breath!"

The Jewish prayer book is called the Siddur, which means "order, structure." So we must ask why, if prayer has a quality of pure visceral expression, is there the need to structure prayer in words on a page? The response is that human

**Human beings crave song and expression,
and also yearn for order and structure.**

beings crave song, expression, and voice, and they also yearn for order and structure. The creation of the world through a series of ordered steps—"the seven days"—teaches about the process that generates order from chaos: "and it was good." When no structure is provided, we will quickly create it, and often in crude forms. A testament to this impulse is the violent hierarchy created by shipwrecked school children in William Golding's novel *Lord of the Flies*.

Mature cultures will develop more sophisticated and peaceable forms that speak to the need for order and structure in the human soul. The cycles of Jewish prayer set out frameworks for spiritual practice, whether one chooses to abide by them daily, weekly on Shabbat, or in sync with the calendar of Jewish holidays. Like going to the gym or playing a musical instrument, regular practice will enhance the quality of an athletic or musical experience; it also supports maintaining the practice on days when inspiration may be lacking.

The Siddur is an artifact of a Jewish culture attuned to the human need for spiritual connection. It is a book of poetry shaped by thousands of years of spiritual response to our people's experience. When we recite the poems of the Siddur, we can hear our own spiritual yearnings resonate with those of Jews across time and space. Like a song we all know—whether sung aloud in chorus, chanted quietly in *minyan*, recited alone, or harmonized with the prayers of others—prayer is at once personal and communal. We each have our own cry, our own laugh, our own breath, but we synchronize our personal experiences with those of others through singing a communal song.

The Talmud may be considered a record of the Jewish mind, the Torah the scroll of our heart. The Siddur is surely the songbook of the Jewish soul, a well-spring of Jewish creativity, and a source of our cultural continuity. Great modern Jewish poets such as Chaim Nachman Bialik and Yehudah Amichai were profoundly learned in the spirit and language of the Siddur; contemporary Jewish musicians in Israel and the diaspora draw on its sources. We all know Leonard Cohen's soulful Halleluyah: "Praise God."

At our school we pray with our students for many reasons: to present them each day with predictable reliable opportunities for mindful spiritual practice; to strengthen their community through shared song; and to ensure they are in touch emotionally and intellectually with the creative sap of the Jewish people. We pray that our students grow up to contribute their own voices to the Jewish songbook. Halleluyah!

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), p. 284.

מוֹדָה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ

I Give Thanks to You

BY DANIEL HELD

While the breakdown of daily habits wreaked a certain havoc on our lives during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, as a parent, the upending of our routines offered me a window into my kids' lived experience and the chance to remember certain other habits that I had come to take for granted.

Daily, I would sit on one side of the room that we had designated as my "office" (and which is also my middle child's bedroom) as she sat on the other side. I would listen as, together with her kindergarten class, she would start *tefillah* (morning prayer) singing—in the awkward non-synchronous Zoom way:

מוֹדָה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ חַי וְקַיִם שֶׁהַחַיּוֹת בֵּי נַשְׁמָתֵי בְּחַמְלָה, רַבָּה אֲמוּנָתְךָ
I give thanks to You living and everlasting God for
You have restored my soul with mercy. Great is Your
faithfulness.

Following the singing, her teacher would ask each child what they were thankful for that day. As only kindergarteners can, the answers ranged from challah to cuddles, parents to pajamas. No matter the answer, the question had encouraged each child to pause for a moment and find themselves in that *tefillah*, to personalize it for that particular day and make it their own.

The prayer created a moment of reflection and of gratitude. What do they have in their lives—even in difficult times—that they feel thankful for? Once every kindergarten student had shared their gratitude, the teacher would help each translate their statement of thanks into Hebrew. Daily, I saw this teaching of highly personalized prayer blended together with action, self-awareness, and second-language skills. I listened as each learning pushed the other deeper.

Thankfulness is a state of being that is antithetical to the mindset of needing, wanting, and nagging. We pause to appreciate what we have rather than describe the things we want, which are usually material dreams. Despite the strain of a stay-at-home order, when these young kids were distanced from their family and friends, they began each day with a guided reflection of gratitude, grounded in our tradition. The *Modeh Ani* prayer's endurance and ubiquity in our cultural routine brings to light how thankfulness has been serving our people through many years—"through thick and thin," as they say.

Decades of research in psychology point to the impact of gratitude on the individual—their health and well-being, happiness, and satisfaction. Beyond the individual, gratitude also has social benefits. In many ways, it plays the role of a social glue, inspiring generosity, engendering kindness, and fostering caring. Traits we want in kindergarten children and a kindergarten cohort.

Gratitude, however, is not a rote exercise. The Raising Grateful Children Project at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill¹ offers a four-step process for young children:

Noticing—Recognizing the things you have to be grateful for.

Thinking—Thinking about why you've been given those things.

Feeling—The emotions you experience as a result of the things you've been given.

Doing—The way you express appreciation.

My daughter's kindergarten teacher was empowering her students to notice the things they were grateful for, teaching the students the value of gratitude and forming a community, which could stay with these kids right through their schooling.

Across the hall, in another bedroom-now-classroom, I could hear my third grader's class also using *tefillah* as a moment to express thanks. *Birkot Hashachar*, the Morning Blessings, are a set of standardized reflections, thanking God for the gift of intellect, the miracle of our body, the provision of our most basic needs:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ... אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לְשִׁכּוֹי בִּינָה לְהַבְחִין בֵּין יוֹם וּבֵין לַיְלָה
Blessed are You ... Who gives the rooster understanding
to distinguish between day and night.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ... שֶׁעָשִׂי כְּרִצּוֹנִי
Blessed are You ... Who made me according to Your will.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ... פּוֹקֵחַ עֵוְרִים
Blessed are You ... Who gives sight to the blind.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ... מַלְבִּישׁ עֲרֻמִּים
Blessed are You ... Who clothes the naked.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ... זוֹקֵף כְּפוּפִים

Blessed are You ... Who straightens the bent.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ... שֶׁעָשָׂה לִי כָּל-צְרָכָי

Blessed are You ... Who provides me with all my needs.

For these older students, the exercise in gratitude was not about noticing—that is something the rabbis had done for us—but about thinking and doing. Why have we been given the understanding to distinguish between day and night, the ability to see, the clothes to wear or a body capable of miraculous things? How do we feel as a result of these abilities and gifts? How will we make use of these gifts throughout the day and throughout our lives?

We may think more readily of prayer as a time to make a request: we ask for healing, for peace, for good grades on tests. The opportunity to petition God to intervene on our behalf is important. It can give focus to our hopes and dreams, our anxieties and fears. For many of us, being able to ask God for help is a motivator for prayer; it is the reason to open a Siddur, go to shul, or to write a note for the Kotel. We know that when we go to the Kotel, the Western Wall in Jerusalem, we can write down a private request of God on a tiny piece of paper, fold it up tight, and put it in a crevice between the rocks. This kind of prayer may support a private channel between each of us and God, but in most of Jewish liturgy, the formula we use for communal worship is not about asking. It's about thanking. But why? Rabbi Jonathan Sacks reflects that

To thank God is to know that I do not have less because my neighbour has more. I am not less worthwhile because someone else is more successful. Through prayer I know that I am valued for what I am. I learn to cherish what I have, rather than be diminished but what I do not have.²

For twenty-six weeks, Ontario schools were closed to in-person learning because of COVID-19. Each morning during that closure, my children began their day expressing thanks, not because it was an easy moment that served to calm them after they bounded in with joy (as they often did/do when the carpool pulls up next to school and they clamour to see their friends), but because, even without the exciting social whirl, beginning the day with thanks puts the rest of the day in context. I saw how it set them up for the day with the warm joy of appreciation for what they have rather than the cold feeling of lament for what they were missing. I feel very thankful for the blessing of hearing my kids start every morning with words of gratitude.

¹ See Andrea Hussong, "What Parents Neglect to Teach about Gratitude," *Greater Good Magazine*, November 21, 2017, https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/what_parents_neglect_to_teach_about_gratitude.

² Jonathan Sacks, *Celebrating Life: Finding Happiness in Unexpected Places* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), p. 15.

Thankfulness has been
serving our people for years.

Developing an inner compass, an internal guidance system that keeps us pointed in the right direction, is a demanding yet worthwhile project.

Here I Am! Hineni!

BY RABBI JOSEPH KANOFSKY

Three times in the story of the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22), Abraham says: “Hineni.” “Here I am.” It’s more than just a geographic location; “Hineni” means “Behold, I am.” It also says “I am here with complete receptivity.” And “I am here in a state of full readiness and attentiveness.” How much is conveyed in one word!

It is also Moses’ attentiveness, readiness, and receptivity when he is called from the midst of the burning bush to lead the Jewish people (Exodus 2:4) Moses is called to do something that is neither his nature nor his inclination: to lead, to speak, to assume a great deal of responsibility for others; namely the Jewish people. It’s not his forte, it’s not his métier; and yet with his “hineni” he opens up possibilities and potentials of which even he himself was heretofore unaware.

With not a small dash of irony, our wise commentators note that “ani,” the Hebrew singular first-person pronoun, is an anagram of “ayin,” meaning nothingness. “Ani” in Hebrew or “I” is the ultimate statement of ego and self; and yet it contains in its essence a note of humility and even self-abnegation. That’s an interesting contradiction!

Perhaps that seeming contradiction embraces two opposites and blends them into one: in order to be our most fully present self, we must be completely and fully aware of our talents, gifts, interests, and shortcomings. At the very same moment, we can be able and willing to suspend all egocentrism to become completely open to new possibilities, new insight, new horizons of potential.

Our tradition further teaches that “a full vessel cannot contain; only an empty vessel can contain.” Try to fill a jug full of water with more water; the surplus will only overflow the container. However, when a container is completely empty, it can be filled to its capacity.

That image applies to us. When we are full of self, preoccupied with our knowledge, our expertise, and our already-formed views, it’s difficult for us to absorb or digest

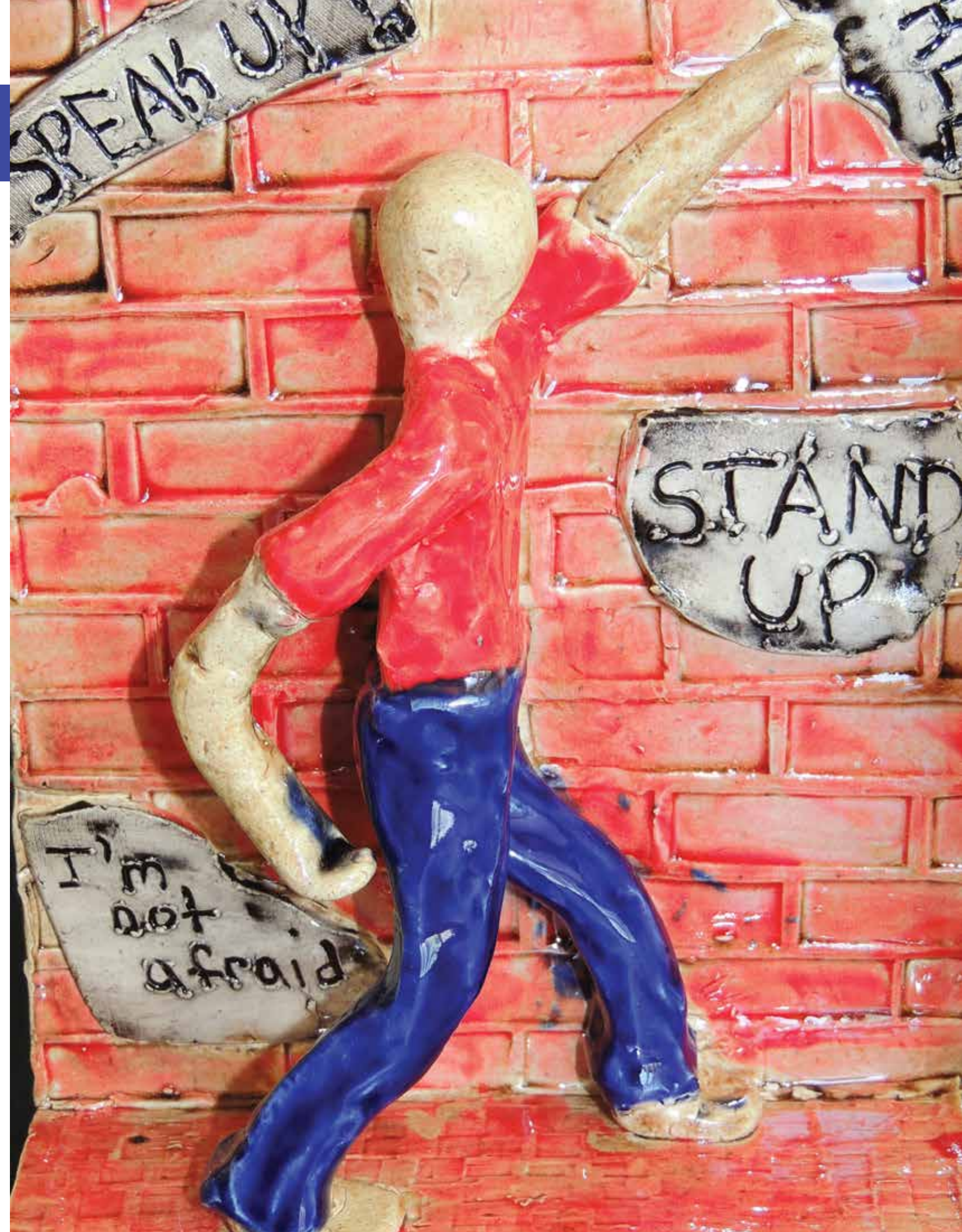
new information and insight. When we let go of preoccupation with self, we open up capacity within ourselves for new learning, experience, and potential.

The possibility of “hineni” is relevant for all of us in some form or another: how can we pay proper attention to what is worthwhile in our world? In our accelerated universe of instant messaging, clickbait, and endless attention-surfing, how can we develop and celebrate the necessary skills to be able to concentrate properly on what we’re doing and rein in our attentions from being distributed scattershot across so many targets?

A stirring prayer recited by the prayer leader on the High Holidays begins: “Hineni.” “Here I am.” The prayer is a moving statement of humility, and it summons up the cantor’s or leader’s diffidence in facing the appointed task of acting as the emissary of the congregation. Yet the one-word preamble “Hineni” might be an unspoken prayer of each person as we awake and rise to engage the challenges of each day.

We hope for a guidestar, a lamp to illuminate our path and guide our way. In biblical times that might have been a pillar of fire or a pillar of cloud; in our days we follow the synthetic-voice instructions of our GPS or Waze with no less faith and confidence. Developing an inner compass, an internal guidance system that keeps us pointed in the right direction, is a demanding yet worthwhile project.

It involves embracing more than one tension: self-awareness and humility. Drive and flexibility. Direction and the ability to change course when we encounter obstacles. Self-confidence and self-evaluation. It also involves taking a deep breath at the beginning of each day and saying, “Here I am; Hineni.” We are ready to meet the challenges and embrace them. Bringing all we have, realizing that there is a deep well of possibility in us. We just have to let that possibility rise to the surface. Here we go!



**WORK
& PLAY**





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.

Let's Prescribe Nature

BY ERIN SILVERSTEIN

Time spent outside seems to improve academic performance.



Rabbi Nachman of Breslov believed if we pour our hearts into nature, it will pour all that it is into us. His celebrated prayer says so much:

Master of the universe, let me seclude myself in meditation and prayer every day; let me go out to the fields to meditate, among the trees and grass, pouring out my heart in prayer. For all the leaves and grass, all the trees and plants, will stir themselves to greet me; they will rise to infuse my words and prayers with their energy and life force... They will combine all their spiritual power and bring my words up to their Source.¹

Our children desperately need to be in nature. Especially today, and whether they can identify it or not, their young bodies and souls are craving a peaceful yet stimulating environment for learning and contemplation, where they can explore, play, move around, and be themselves.

There's a well-established correlation between time spent in nature and stress reduction. A close friend who is a nurse practitioner prescribes nature as a remedy to her patients—for mental health, lung and cardiovascular health, and insomnia.

A 2018 meta study highlights physical benefits such as reduced heart rate and blood pressure,² an earlier one cites emotional wellness, less anxiety, and calming effects that last...³ The ongoing investigations are very exciting. PaRx is a Canadian evidence-based health-care initiative which sets the golden rule for overall well-being as two hours in nature per week (roughly 20 minutes per day). The objective is to cultivate a meaningful connection to nature whether through walking, running, or just sitting; the prescription is to put electronic devices down, listen, look, smell, taste, and feel the non-human world around us.

Meanwhile, research is also exploring the educational effects of learning in nature. Increased time spent outdoors seems to correspond to improved academic performance. I observe how my own children's behaviour shifts and their concentration sharpens with time spent outside. Evidence also tells that conditions such as ADHD receive effective support with outside breaks outside, like short nature walks between classes.

Then there's the all educational content that is best learned outdoors. For example, a real garden adventure watching caterpillars crawl, seeking chrysalises, and seeing butterflies emerge is a stronger learning experience than an introduction to the metamorphosis through slo-mo classroom videos. The awe in a child's eyes sparks the wonder that leads to more learning.

There are also forest schools: after-school programs, camps, and full-fledged private or public schools. My children have attended forest programs in British Columbia and in Toronto's Earl Bales Park; they explored ravines, followed animal tracks, and listened to owls in the dark. They have had the chance to get muddy from head to toe, consider natural water filtration systems, learning math and science through play.

I feel blessed that my children attend a school that prioritizes learning about the natural world. The Toronto Heschel School provides so much opportunity to do so. Heschel is infinitely fortunate in its expansive greenspace. Teachers, staff, students, parents, and alumni have collaborated over the years on the school's wonderful learning gardens. In light of COVID-19 and knowledge that infections spread less outdoors, Heschel is expanding its outdoor classrooms.

Our school is on a journey to enhance outdoor learning, develop the natural environment, as well as its future protectors and advocates. In 2020 the City of Toronto awarded Toronto Heschel a PollinatorTO grant for a special kind of garden that attracts beneficial insects, such as bees and butterflies. The hexagonal gardens remind of honeycomb, the multi-level beds encourage children to walk and jump, and the native Ontario plants are gorgeous and sensorial. The school's 2020 graduating class planted 55 native trees and shrubs across the school property. Heschel's wide-open yard will eventually host rich biodiverse plant growth with winding paths and quiet corners for students to play along and sit within. Heschel was also awarded a Friends of the Environment grant from the Toronto Dominion Bank and began construction of a maze made from willow branches. As the willow trees mature and the maze fills out, the twisting branches of the growing saplings will offer surprising schoolyard fun.

Environmental stewardship is a long cherished pillar of the Toronto Heschel School. Its expanding outdoor program is a blessing all around. Every one wins: the insect and plants, the children, and the school itself. In our tradition it is written, "If you have a sapling in your hand and people tell you that the Messiah has come, plant the sapling and then go and greet him" (Avot de Rabbi Natan, Version B, c. 31).

1 *The Flame of the Heart: Prayers of a Chasidic Mystic—Reb Nosson of Breslov*, translated and adapted by David Sears with the Breslov Research Institute (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2006), p. 64.

2 C. Twohig-Bennett and A. Jones, "The Health Benefits of the Great Outdoors: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Greenspace Exposure and Health Outcomes," *Environmental Research*, Vol. 166 (October 2018), pp. 628–637, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envres.2018.06.030>.

3 E.A. Richardson, J. Pearce, R. Mitchell, and S. Kingham, "Role of Physical Activity in the Relationship between Urban Green Space and Health," *Public Health*, Vol. 127, No. 4 (April 2013), pp. 318–324, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2013.01.004>.



What is timeless for all Israel
becomes timely for a young Jew.

The Timely and the Timeless in Israel Education

BY DVORA GOODMAN

When we started working on this issue of THINK magazine on the topic of daily life and extraordinary times, I immediately thought of my work with the iCenter in helping educators teach about Israel (www.theicenter.org). At the iCenter we often use a framework that distinguishes between

enduring themes about what Israel has always meant to the Jewish people and important factors that exist right now—in other words, between the timeless and the timely. Both these factors run through the different ways we help children at Heschel connect to Israel.



Forming Relationships with Israel

For years Israel education in the Diaspora aspired to deliver information about Israel, its history, and its place in the world. What were the different waves of immigration (*aliyot*) throughout history? Who was the first prime minister of Israel? When did Israel begin to make peace with neighbours? Unfortunately, relationships built on flat data, dates, and sporadic events, such as an annual Yom Ha'atzmaut celebration or a sudden newsworthy happening, tend to remain shallow and fail if challenged.

The awareness grew that, just as our personal relationships warrant continual attention, so too a maturing child's affinity to Israel requires focus and nurturing. Barry Chazan, a professor at the Spertus Institute of Jewish Learning and Leadership, introduced a relational approach to Israel: he places the individual—not the country—at the centre of Israel education, with the individual's relationship with Israel becoming the content of the learning.¹ Facts and information play a role in this approach, but attitudes and identifications are the starting points.

At Heschel: Our school takes particular joy in annually hosting young Israeli volunteers, called Shinshinim. The goal, which is especially successful with Junior High students, is to create meaningful friendships between our students and the young Israelis. It fosters a friends-and-family type of familiarity with the kind of interactions that introduce students to feeling somehow involved with the Israeli community. Whether it's learning how these few Israelis spend Lag Ba'omer, how all of Israel memorializes Yitzhak Rabin, or simply getting a glimpse of Israeli life, the friendships are a positive experience.



Daily Life in Israel

Let's remember that Israel education aims for connection and that children can't relate to a place that is only mythical. They might thrill momentarily to stories of adventures, bravery, and overcoming obstacles, but it's not enough.

There seems to have been a belief among educators that it was important strategically to deliver an extraordinary narrative and orbit their teaching around the exceptional—biblical, historic, military. It went like this: Israel was a dream that became reality; it saved Jews from the Diaspora persecution. Pioneers settled what was once an uninhabitable land; out of the desert emerged a modern, technologically advanced society; and Hebrew, once almost a dead language, became the flourishing language of the new country.

Unfortunately, the risk in any story of mythic proportions is that listeners detach. Young Jews in the Diaspora cannot always see the relevance that Israel may have for them today. What is needed is a pedagogy that preserves what is exceptional about Israel but also presents a country like others where regular people live ordinary lives.² After all, establishing a safe productive everyday life is what the early Zionists set out to do.

At Heschel: Edna Sharet, the director of Junior High at Toronto Heschel, dreams of taking her students to Israel in person. Until that happens, however, she uses pop culture to engage her students. In teaching about Israel, she begins with history, geography, and all of the pizzazz and fun of Israel as a young and vibrant country. She employs

popular music and lyrics, Israeli jargon and slogans, movies and videos. She understands that this is the language that our youngsters speak. The visiting Shinshinim and Hebrew-speaking staff at the school fill out the picture with stories of everyday life in Israel today, and this builds anticipation for what students will see when they do visit: a place steeped in history with life bustling everywhere, ancient ruins alongside technological achievements. Educators can also connect students to the land and state through our ancient rituals and modern daily prayers. Israel begins to run their hearts.



Conflicts and Tensions

Research shows that children as young as kindergarten age can manage complex truths about Israel.³ It is important for children, even young children, to understand that Israel has its conflicts and complications. The nature of the conflicts may be static, even as tensions flare and abate at different times. When children come to consider what is worth fighting for and why peace matters, they learn important life lessons. Israel's experience opens their eyes. They observe the importance that the Jewish state holds for their parents and teachers, and they observe how values and tensions are, in truth, the currency of the whole world.

At Heschel: Junior High students explore complex viewpoints and tensions with the objective of fostering critical thinking and informed debate. In Hebrew, students argue and identify from the viewpoints of different personalities involved in the conflicts facing Israel society. To this end, one Grade 8 class depicted *Dor Shalem Doresh Shalom* (a whole generation demands peace) as their end-of-year graffiti project on the side of the school building. A timeless notion that is true even at home in Toronto, the slogan expresses the dreams of generations of Israelis yearning for peace and normalcy.



Jewish Peoplehood

Ultimately, what matters about Israel is why the country is important to us. Essentially, Israel's purpose is to ground the flourishing of the Jewish people. The reason for Israel traces back to the very first time that God told Abraham, "*Lech Lecha Meartzecha*" (Go from your land to the place where I will show you; Genesis 12:1). From this early connection with God, Abraham and his descendants were linked by their history, values, and beliefs. Israel fuses all Jewish people for present and future purposes even as it manifests our common beginnings.

At Heschel: If we can't take the students to Israel, we can bring Israel to them. Jewish day schools like The Toronto Heschel School offer children a Jewish experience much like they would find in Israel: living and breathing through Jewish time and a strong consistent use of Hebrew throughout the day. Heschel's commitment to interdisciplinary integrated study, intentionally fusing Judaics and secular subjects, strengthens this for its learners. By making these fusions explicit, educators help their learners explore the place of Israel in their Jewish identities and expressions.



Conclusion

Israel education that can be done in a school is limited because the Israel that exists in children's imaginations is not yet a living and breathing reality. When they finally visit, either as youngsters with their families or when they are teens, they start to more fully understand and appreciate the land, country, and all it stands for Jewishly. Our job is to plant and nurture the seeds that will sprout the very first time they exit an airplane at Ben Gurion Airport. That's when what is timeless for all Israel becomes timely for a young Jew.

- 1 Barry Chazan, *A Philosophy of Israel Education: A Relational Approach* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
- 2 I heard this idea expressed by Dr. Zohar Raviv, International VP of Education for Taglit-Birthright Israel, at an online lecture on April 22, 2021.
- 3 Sivan Zakai, "Israel Is Meant for Me: Kindergarteners' Conceptions of Israel," *Journal of Jewish Education*, Vol. 81, No.1 (2015), pp. 4-34, doi: 10.1080/15244113.2015.1007019.

REST &
REFLECT



The Bedtime Hour

BY AVA KWINTER

Shared intimacy is a
lifelong treasure at sunset.

This article was originally going to discuss, and probably support, the ideas in a book called *The Enchanted Hour: The Miraculous Power of Reading Aloud in the Age of Distraction* by Meghan Cox Gurdon. The book claims that reading aloud to children is extraordinarily beneficial to their cognitive development and, in fact, increases their brain functions; Cox Gurdon argues that a minimum of an hour a day of listening to an adult read aloud will build “optimal patterns of brain development” in young children.¹ She does not pull any punches when looking at the converse side of this equation; children who are not read to, she tells us, may have brains that are not as finely developed, and could very well grow up to be lower functioning than their better-read-to counterparts.

I tell you that I had really intended to agree with this perspective. But I had not yet appreciated that the “me” who I was before the COVID-19 pandemic is not the “me” who I am post-pandemic. Although the book was published in 2019, when I read it in the spring of 2021, it felt like it was coming from another planet. After 16 months of lockdowns and school closures that isolated children from their friends and relatives, and tested parents’ mental and emotional endurance to their outer limits, Cox Gurdon’s chipper advice—that we should read aloud to our kids for at least an hour every day in order to make them happier, smarter, more competitive—sounds so idealistic that it’s almost absurd. At home with our children for hundreds of hours at a time, many of our days have been tedious, frustrating, and overwhelming. Given the Zoom lifestyle, I have to wonder just who has the energy, focus, or emotional bandwidth to make their kids sit for yet another hour while a novel is read aloud? In my current state of mind—midsummer 2021—staging a reading hour sounds neither appealing nor particularly relevant. It’s not a priority.

A couple of years ago my concerns were different. I may not have flinched to read in *The Enchanted Hour* how “the [medical and scientific] team discovered that the brains of young children whose parents read aloud to them often, and who had access to more children’s books, had more robust activation than their peers...” or that “well-read-to-children...will enjoy a cognitive advantage over peers.”² I would have accepted this opinion as fact and included it with what I thought I knew about the best way to raise my children. However, now when I read these words from a hopefully post-lockdown perspective, this thinking feels ridiculously out-of-touch and naive. Speaking to the diversified inclusivity we aim for in 2021, I now sense how pronouncements such as this may in fact undermine families’ efforts to just do the best that they can in the circumstances in which they live.

Cox Gurdon claims that reading aloud is “a magic elixir that will make your family smarter, happier, healthier, more successful, and more closely attached.”³ I would argue that many roads lead to that destination. Certainly, reading out loud to children can be edifying and contribute to healthy families and successful adults, but it’s neither a prerequisite

nor is it the only truth; it’s in no child’s best interest to idealize reading aloud as yet another myth we know to be false.

Do I still read to my kids? Sure, sometimes. Reading has always been a huge part of my life, and of course I want to share that with my family. But these days I read aloud to them a lot less than I used to and this has taught me something new. I’ve learned that after spending the day cajoling my three kids onto Zoom, coaching them about doing their schoolwork, and trying to uphold some semblance of a schedule, the last thing my family needs at day’s end is a ritualized instructive bedtime routine. And when we do read, the nature of the books has changed: I’ve noticed that my kids have lost their taste for new stories. Last year we would read chapter books, now night after night my 6-year-old twins want to revisit their old picture books, the ones that they know every word of, every picture. My 11 year-old has also been rereading her past favourites: all the Harry Potters, all the Percy Jacksons. I get it. It’s calming to fall into a world where right and wrong are clear-cut, and it’s especially soothing to know from the get-go how the story will turn out. Everything has a season, and it seems the pandemic was not the time for new horizons; it was the time to find comfort in the familiar. So we retrace our steps, leafing through dog-eared old favourites and finding solace there.

So what of the “enchanted hour”? Cox Gurdon locates the value of the bedtime story in the structure of the narrative, the newly acquired vocabulary, the logical reasoning skills, and other edifying benefits that emerge from reading texts. For my part, I think there is as much, if not more, truly golden value to be found in the fact of time spent together, a phenomenon unrelated to the content of the story. Perhaps during these unusual times we should pay more attention to the relationship we are cultivating with our children and observe that the literary heft of the books pales as a benchmark beside it.

Maybe it’s not the “enchantment” that is important right now, but the “hour,” not the content of the story, but the container of the time, the moment shared. I suggest that one of the most important things that we can do now is just sit with our children and focus on the same thing that they are paying attention to at the very same time. These days, it will likely be a screen. I think that’s okay. Even peering into a screen as a shared experience can be emotionally nourishing. Maybe it’s restorative to select and then listen to someone else’s voice for a while, not to each other’s. Now sometimes before bed, my kids and I snuggle up and watch cute animal YouTube videos. Some nights my husband and sons doze off with synchronicity while viewing sports highlights. Letting screens deliver the elocution doesn’t deny family intimacy, and maybe—after all is said and done—it’s the mutuality of shared intimacy that is a lifelong treasure at sunset.

1 Meghan Cox Gurdon, *The Enchanted Hour: The Miraculous Power of Reading Aloud in the Age of Distraction* (New York: Harper, 2019), p. 8.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

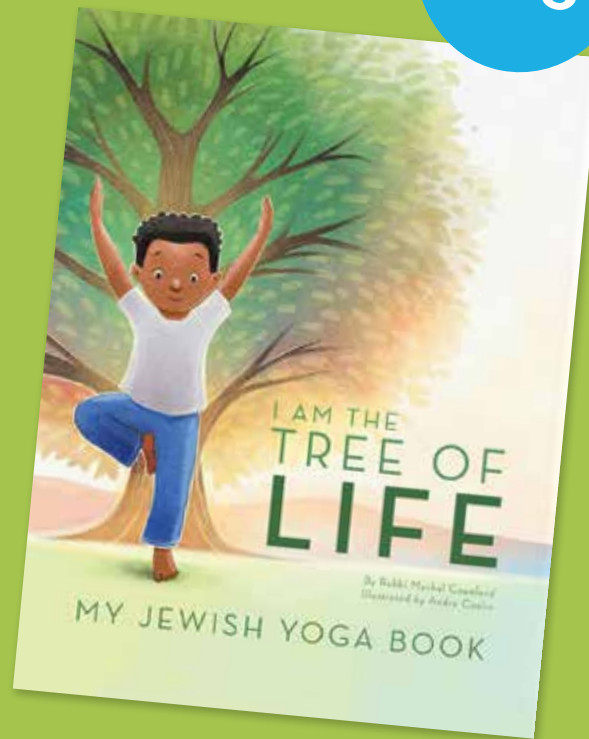
Good Books

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHILDREN AND THE PEOPLE WHO LOVE THEM

BY TZIPORAH COHEN & GAIL BAKER

I Am the Tree of Life: My Jewish Yoga Book
by Rabbi Mychal Copeland and illustrated by Andre Ceolin
(Apples and Honey Press, 2020)

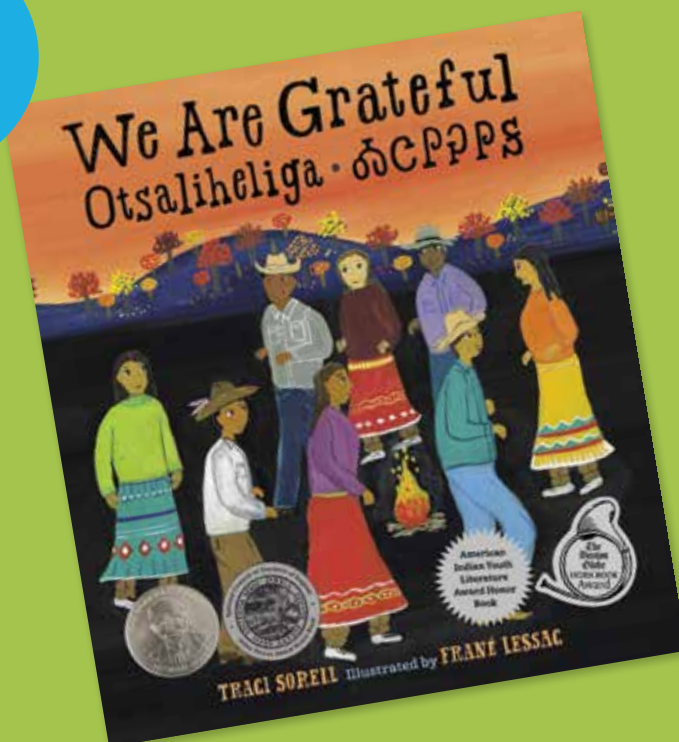
“How might it feel to stand at Mount Sinai or dance at the Red Sea?” asks Rabbi Copeland in the introduction to this clever book which pairs stories from the Torah and Tanakh with yoga poses for beginners. The Boat Pose evokes the story of Noah’s Ark; the Camel Pose relates to Rebekah offering water to Abraham’s servant and his camels; and the Fish Pose manifests the giant fish that swallowed Jonah. On each double-page spread, the left side shows a child demonstrating a yoga pose, accompanied by easy-to-follow, step-by-step instructions. A fun illustration of the linked Bible story fills the right-hand page. The fusion of two ancient cultures lets the young reader literally embody Jewish stories and enjoy the experience.



AGES
5-8

We Are Grateful: Otsaliheliga
by Traci Sorell and illustrated by Frané Lessac
(Charlesbridge Publishing, 2018)

With vibrant folk-style art, this picture book highlights how the daily practice of gratitude can add tremendous value to our lives. The Cherokee cultivate thankfulness and express their appreciation of daily life, including time spent with family and the joys of being outdoors, “We say *otsaliheliga* as we clean our houses, wear new clothes, enjoy a feast, and forget old quarrels... while we collect buckbrush and honeysuckle to weave baskets... as shell shakers dance all night around the fire...” Progressing season to season, the book reminds the reader of all there is to cherish in their own life. This important universal theme resonates for all.



AGES
4-9

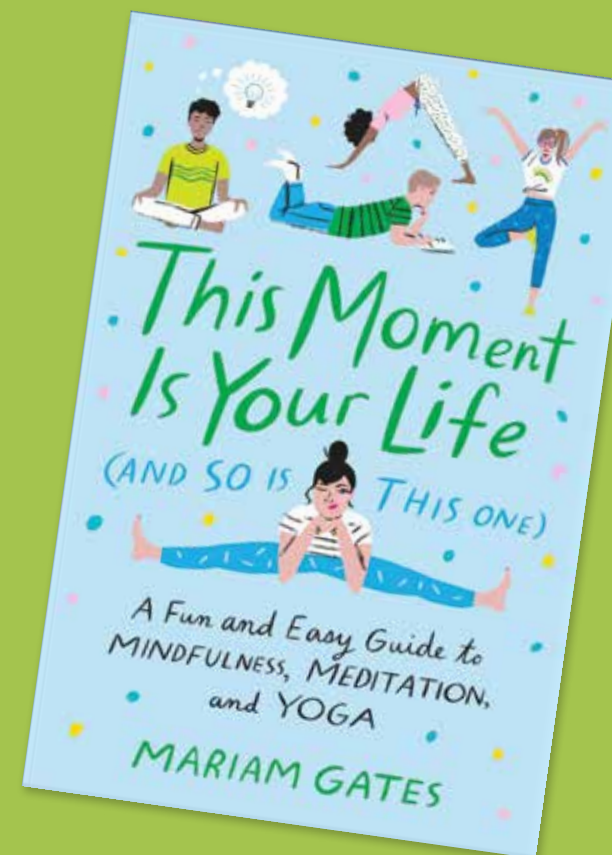
AGES
4-10



I Talk Like a River
by Jordan Scott and illustrated by Sydney Smith
(Neal Porter Books, 2020)

A boy stutters. In class he is embarrassed when kids laugh at him. On a particularly bad speech day, his father takes him for a walk by the river. He has always noticed and enjoyed the different sounds and shapes in nature and his dad suggests that in some ways he speaks like the river. Smith’s soft, unfocused illustrations draw the reader into the turmoil in this child’s everyday experience. “See how the water moves? That’s how you speak,” says the father. “Bubbling, whirling, churning and crashing.” Comforted by this very natural point of view, the boy returns to school with more ease and confidence, despite the stutter. Based on the author’s own experience.

AGES
10-14



This Moment Is Your Life (And So Is This One): A Fun and Easy Guide to Mindfulness, Meditation, and Yoga
by Mariam Gates and illustrated by Libby Vanderploeg
(Dial Books, 2018)

With chapters on yoga, breathing, and meditation, this book for middle-grade readers is a perfect introduction to methods for managing stress and reducing distraction. What makes this such a great book is that Gates explains how to unplug from daily pressures and increase mindfulness in terms that are understandable by young people, alternating science and anecdotes with practical exercises. Engaging and interspersed graphics add fun and inclusivity and Gates wraps up with several 5-Day Mindfulness Challenges to help incorporate these practices into everyday life.

The narrator finds herself navigating the rules—not only of being Jewish but also of being an ethical person—throughout the novel.

No Vacancy by Tziporah Cohen

MIDDLE-GRADE NOVEL

BY LISA RICHLER

Full disclosure: I have known and been a fan of *No Vacancy*'s author, Tziporah Cohen, since long before I read a word of her writing. Tziporah and I met in the halls of The Toronto Heschel School, where we had children in the same grade, and where we worked together on the Book Fair and other school events. Tziporah moved to Toronto from Boston with her husband and three kids. She is a practising psychiatrist who decided to pursue an M.F.A. in Writing for Children in her spare time. (I have since learned that Tziporah studied French and Theatre Arts at Cornell University and that she earned her medical degree at Harvard University.) When she sent an email last fall, inviting me to attend a virtual reading of her newly published middle-grade novel, I was curious.

The novel opens with 11-year-old Miriam Brockman facing many new beginnings. After her father loses his job, the family moves from bustling Manhattan to the tiny town of Greenvale, New York (population: 510). Leaving behind them a community of friends and family, the Brockmans find themselves to be the only Jewish family in a town where everyone else eats bacon and goes to church. While her childhood best friends are enjoying summer camp and

family trips, Miriam is inundated with thankless chores; she has been tasked with helping her parents spruce up a run-down motel in the middle of nowhere that they now own. The not-so-aptly-named Jewel Motor Inn will be home to the Brockmans—and their only source of income—until they can save enough money to move on. The trouble is, nobody seems to want to stay there.

Miriam befriends a Catholic girl named Kate, whose grandmother owns the diner next door, famous for its grape pies. Despite differences in their religions and traditions, Kate and Miriam connect easily. The girls soon hatch a scheme that will bring visitors and much-needed revenue to the motel. To their amazement, the plan works, and the motel becomes fully booked. But while the town celebrates a sudden influx of tourists, the girls must grapple with the fact that their newfound good fortune is based on a lie.

Cohen's writing is peppered with insights that elevate the novel beyond run-of-the-mill coming-of-age stories. As Miriam first lays eyes on the dilapidated motel, for instance, she remarks: "Dad gives me a smile—the kind adults give you when they're trying to make you feel something you don't." Cohen's 11-year-old narrator feels distinctive, wise,

and believable from the very start, allowing the reader to get lost in her story.

Cohen expertly develops a cast of characters and a suspenseful plot while posing questions about religion, identity, and community. During Miriam's first Shabbat dinner at her new home, she muses: "Dad says there's no right way and no wrong way to be Jewish. But if that's true, then why do Bubbie and Zaydie get upset when Dad takes me and Sammy to Burger King? And why do we have kosher plates back at home but eat on Mrs. Whitley's plates at the diner? The whole thing would make a lot more sense if someone would just tell me the real rules." Miriam finds herself navigating the rules—not only of being Jewish but also of being an ethical person—throughout the novel.

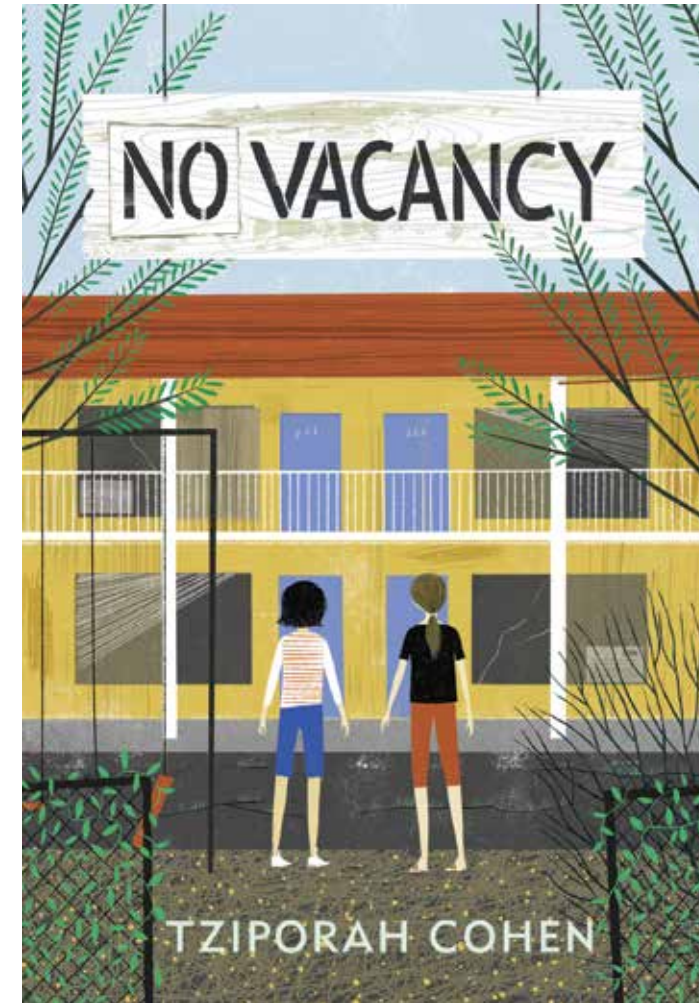
When an act of anti-Semitism is committed at the motel, Miriam is confronted with how divisive religion can be. As a Jew, Miriam feels as though she is a member of an out-numbered team. Yet she can't understand why her own mother mistrusts their loving employee, Maria, or will not invite their new friends for dinner, simply because they are Catholic. One of the novel's most poignant messages is delivered through the local priest, Father Donovan, who explains

to Miriam: "At its worst, religion can make us hate each other, make us suspicious of people who believe differently from what we believe. But at its best, I believe religion can bring out the good in all of us."

Over the course of the novel, Miriam comes to understand how the assumptions we make, often out of fear, can stifle us. Miriam's mother underestimates most of the people in Greenvale, out of fear, preventing her from experiencing community. While Miriam connects easily with others, even those who are different, she underestimates herself, allowing a fear of water to exclude her from wonderful experiences. But when confronted with what matters most to her, Miriam proves to be able to squash her beliefs about herself and to act heroically.

If I was a fan of Tziporah Cohen before reading her work, I am now a full-fledged aficionado. Through masterful storytelling, she reminds us that when we choose to put misguided fears aside, when we find strength and beauty in ourselves and in the diversity around us, we can build a more meaningful and rewarding life.

No Vacancy is published by Groundwood Books (2020), <https://houseofanansi.com/products/no-vacancy>.



Heschel Natives



MORAH ANDI SPRING AND MOREH AIDEN ORZECH

BY AVA KWINTER

Way back when I was in grad school, I took a gap year and taught English as a foreign language in Budapest, Hungary. While I had almost zero credentials as a teacher. I had one spectacular advantage in the eyes of the English language schools: I was a native speaker. There is no match for learning a foreign language from a native speaker. A mother-tongue is a person's most basic default setting: it's the language that you think in, dream in, the one you aren't aware of using, it is just part of your being. The way that a native speaker inhabits the language cannot be learned later: no matter how fluent someone becomes in a foreign language they will always be putting the second language on top of their own native language, like a second layer.

Perhaps a way of thinking can also be so integral as to be considered native. From the time our children are babies we teach them simple binaries like night and day, dangerous and safe, good and bad, and these concepts become inextricable from how they understand the world. The school where they spend the first 10 years of their education also forms part of their identities, in this case an "Heschelian" way of seeing the world through lenses such as Judaism, pluralism, and community. Normally it takes significant professional development to ensure the teachers, who come from disparate backgrounds, speak the same language of Heschelian values; now as a result of educating children for 25 years, the school faculty has recently added a wonderful asset: native Heschelian teachers.

Andi Spring (Grade 6 Veradim) and Aiden Orzech (Grade 4 Derorim) are the Heschel school's first teacher-alumni. Both started at Heschel in kindergarten and graduated from Grade 8, so both can be considered native in Heschelian thought. We spoke together about their early memories and what their alumni identity means to them as teachers.

The school was much smaller back then by half: both Andi and Aiden said this gave it a distinct feel. Everyone knew each other in the way that kids in different grades recognize one another from the playground and the halls: Andi remembers Aiden's brother; Aiden can name some of the kids in

Andi's class. A strong community spirit filtered through the school and returning in 2020 they found this warm feeling persisting as they remembered it. When he saw the adult Andi in the staff room, Aiden said he felt a natural kinship because of their shared Heschel history. They told me, it felt somehow like coming back home. The people felt familiar, and how things are thought about at Heschel was very specific and familiar—a discourse they understand without having to think about it.

Heschel takes interdisciplinary learning to the next level. The curriculum resists compartmentalizing subjects; academic disciplines are intertwined, overlapping, connecting. I asked Andi and Aiden if their fluency in Heschelian ways is liberating or inhibiting to their personal teaching styles. "A little bit of both," Andi said. She remembers many of the lessons and units from her student days, and feels a definite instinct to keep to the trodden path. But simultaneously, she says, "there is a certain freedom" because she feels so confident in her mastery of the method and material. Aiden agreed, "I find that the curriculum is so well developed; it's tried and true, tried and tested. This solidity lets me feel empowered in the moment to make the best decision for my students...the curriculum is a great guiding document."

Speaking with Andi and Aiden I began to understand the unique advantages that native Heschel teachers bring to the school. University teacher programs do not train teachers with an integrated Jewish curriculum in mind and, for sure, not one that is learned through the arts, which is what we have at Heschel. Such characteristics are still avant garde. While although bits and pieces may appear, the whole remains a singular Heschel achievement. As new Heschel faculty, Andi and Aiden had no learning curve in adjusting to this complex model of teaching. A consciously Jewish and arts-based approach is second nature to them. They fully understand how the school's brand of simultaneity. It is already their primary lens and they have no alternative but to show their students the world through this way of thinking. Heschelian is their native language.

Old Friends

BY RONEN LAHAV

It's so dark in here and crowded
 Train wrecks and old books
 Superman now locked in here
 Just like a common crook
 My hair is thinner than it used to be
 I lost an eye in the war
 My insides are in knots now
 Don't you love me anymore?
 You used to take me everywhere
 Eyes filled with love and pride
 I thought you'd be here always
 Now I know you lied
 I used to lay beside you
 You came to me when you were sad
 I may be just an old stuffed bear
 But I thought you were my dad!



INSPIRING WONDER



THE TORONTO HESCHEL SCHOOL

Join us for our Open House on Wednesday, November 10th at 7:30 pm
torontoheschel.org/admissions/open-houses



The Toronto Heschel School
בית הספר על שם השל

