

THINK SPECIAL

# THiNK

THE  
LOLA  
STEIN  
INSTITUTE  
JOURNAL

Conversation about Education, Ethics, and Our Children

The Footsteps of Abraham Joshua Heschel at  
The Toronto Heschel School

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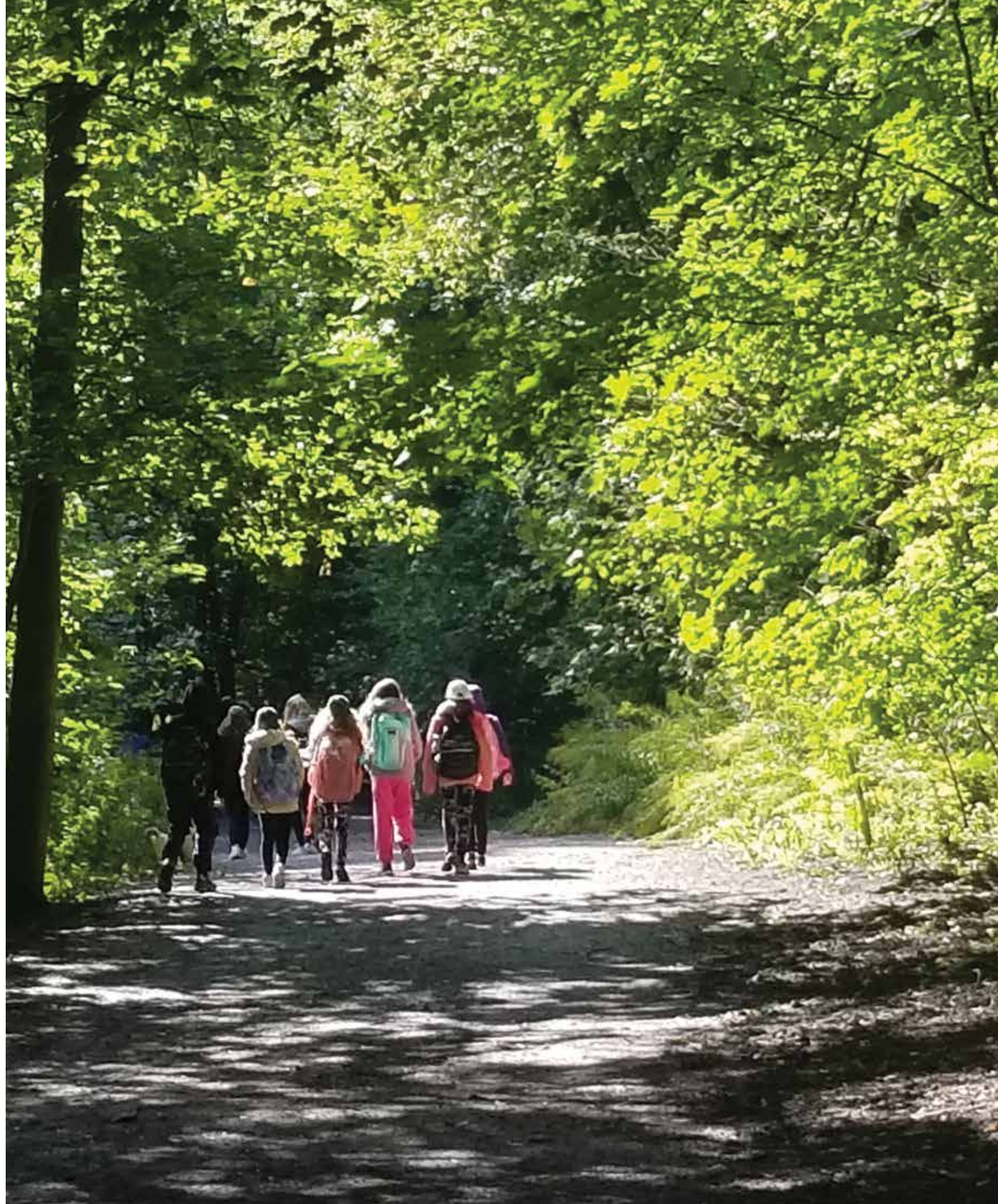
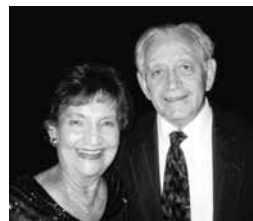
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Lola Stein z"l was an early female pharmacist in South Africa, but her special talent was in hospitality and friendship. She cared for family and friends, at home and abroad, individually, uniquely, and lovingly. We honour her memory in a way that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



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## Who Was AJ Heschel and Who Are We?

The social aspect plays a very great role in Jewish life, but we cannot allow it to eclipse the individual. We teachers face the pupil as an individual: we have to take into consideration his rights and his tasks...for to educate means to meet the inner needs, to respond to the inner goals of the child.

If we look for deeper unity, it must be found not on the level of customs, generalities, and external forms of conduct but on that of the inner life.

—A.J. Heschel, “The Spirit of Jewish Education”

A deed of charity, an act of kindness, a ritual moment—each is prayer in the form of a deed. Such prayer involves a minimum or even absence of outwardness, and an abundance of inwardness... All things have a home: the bird has a nest, the fox has a hole, the bee has a hive. A soul without prayer is a soul without a home.

—A.J. Heschel, “Choose Life!”

The story of why our school cherishes and models the teachings of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel is a beautiful tale to tell. It's all about loving children.

Rabbi Heschel's conviction was that education—and especially Jewish education—hinges on respecting the unique autonomy of each child. His love of children is reflected in the obligation he felt to guide students to an alert, masterful, and responsive consciousness of the world around them. It was his passion that education remove barriers that block soulfulness and create bridges that lead to compassion. Heschel advocated for education that equips children to witness the world through their own eyes and take a stand for its improvement.

The Toronto Heschel School began its journey to fulfill this mission in 1996, thanks to five teacher-founders, three of whose voices return in the pages that follow. The school has evolved over the years, but it also stayed exactly as it began—committed to walking in the footsteps of Abraham Joshua Heschel.

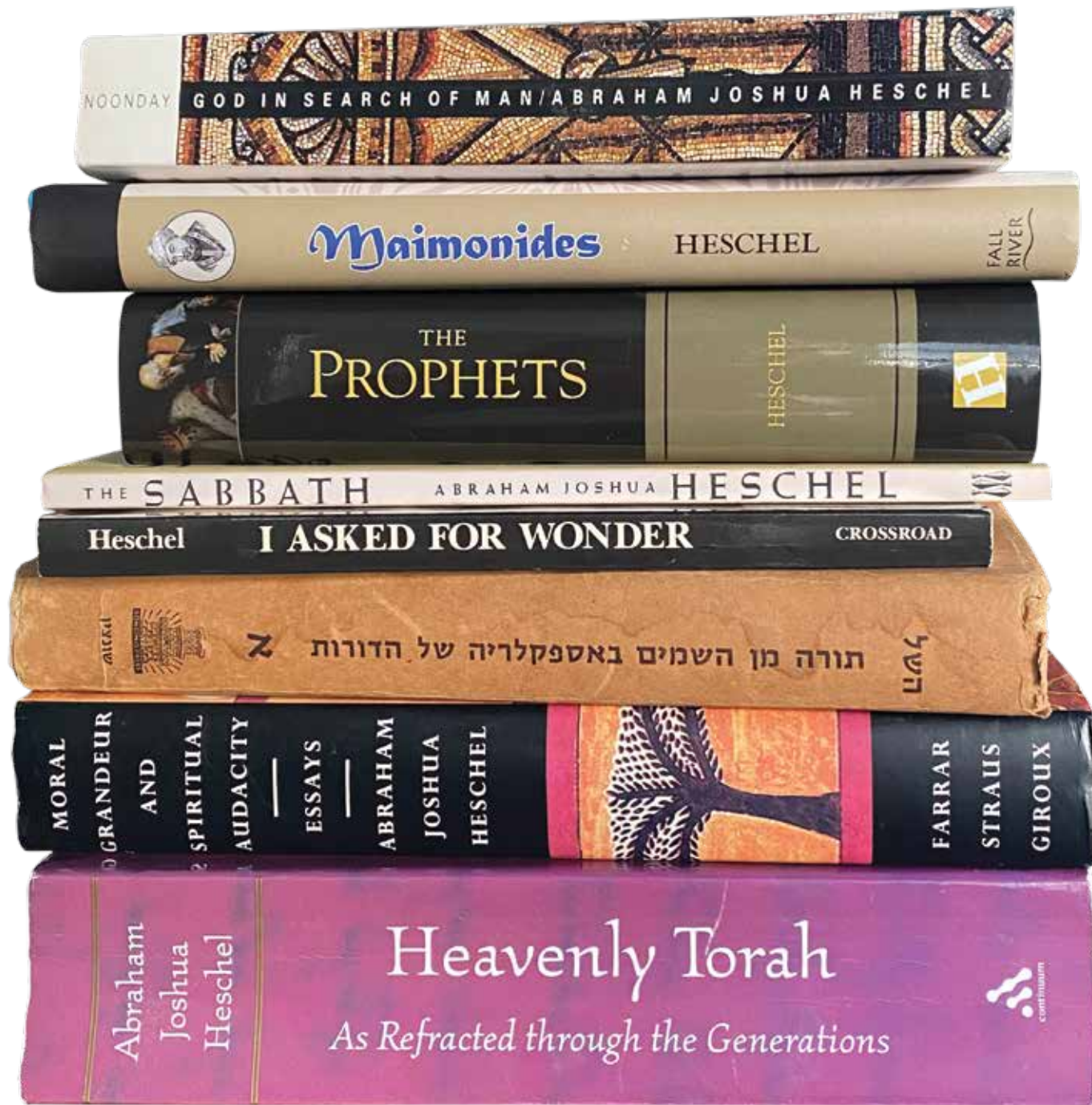
Rabbi Heschel inspires us to be a school community where we thrive together, knowing that differences make us stronger and wiser, and that friendship is key. We nurture students to be ready participants and inventive thinkers, while aware that achievement comes through attitude, talent, and a disciplined commitment to excellence. Through Rabbi Heschel we understand that wonder is the root of all knowledge, and the mysteries that surround us are the source of all learning.

With a view to revisiting our school's spiritual connection and respect for Rabbi Heschel, in this issue of THINK we are sharing conversations about this relationship that were held with our school's co-founders, leaders, and friends over the past few months. We looked into our THINK archives and are presenting articles both old and new—in whole and in pieces—so you, our readers, can enjoy the warmth of our Heschel story.

He was a wondrous teacher. His vision of how we might uplift, galvanize, and treasure our children is as inspirational today as it ever was. I hope we have captured a bit of the essence of the relationship between A.J. Heschel and our school—it's wide, it's deep, and it's ever-changing in all good ways...as you will see.

Pam

Rabbi Heschel was an innovative Jewish thinker and a courageous Jewish leader.



# The Toronto Heschel School: A Good Name

BY GREG BEILES

## The Three Crowns

Rabbi Shimon said, “There are three crowns: the crown of Torah, the crown of priesthood, and the crown of kingship. And the crown of a good name is superior to them all.”<sup>1</sup> In 1996, the founders of a new Jewish day school in Toronto sought “a good name” for their school, a name to symbolize the special kind of Jewish education they envisioned for their children. The school would offer a values-driven education, rooted in the teachings of Judaism and aspire to graduate responsible caring citizens.

The crown of Torah stands for learning; the crown of priesthood stands for ritual and prayer; the crown of kingship stands for justice and fair rule. A good name refers to a person who integrates all of these virtues. The school founders chose to name the school after Rabbi Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel.

Rabbi Heschel was an innovative Jewish thinker and courageous Jewish leader. His life exemplified the integration of Jewish learning, Jewish ritual, and social justice. Steeped in the Hassidic traditions of Eastern European Jewry, while masterful in modern scholarship and philosophy, Heschel was simultaneously a traditional, observant, learned teacher and an outspoken, ground-breaking political and social activist.

Heschel lost most of his extended family during the Shoah, barely escaping himself. In America, he involved himself in the Civil Rights Movement, the Anti-Vietnam War Movement, and the struggle to free Soviet Jewry. He advocated for Jewish pluralism, while holding fast to his own traditional practice. He wrote numerous books of theology in eloquent, inspiring prose.

## Spiritual Teaching and Social Activism

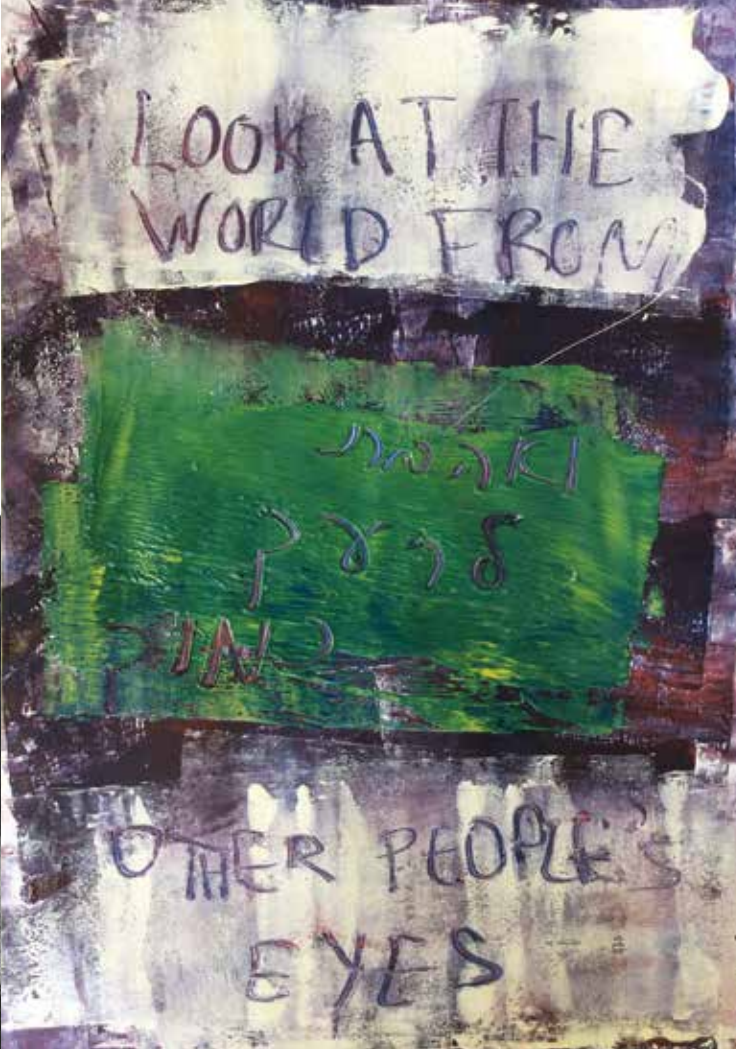
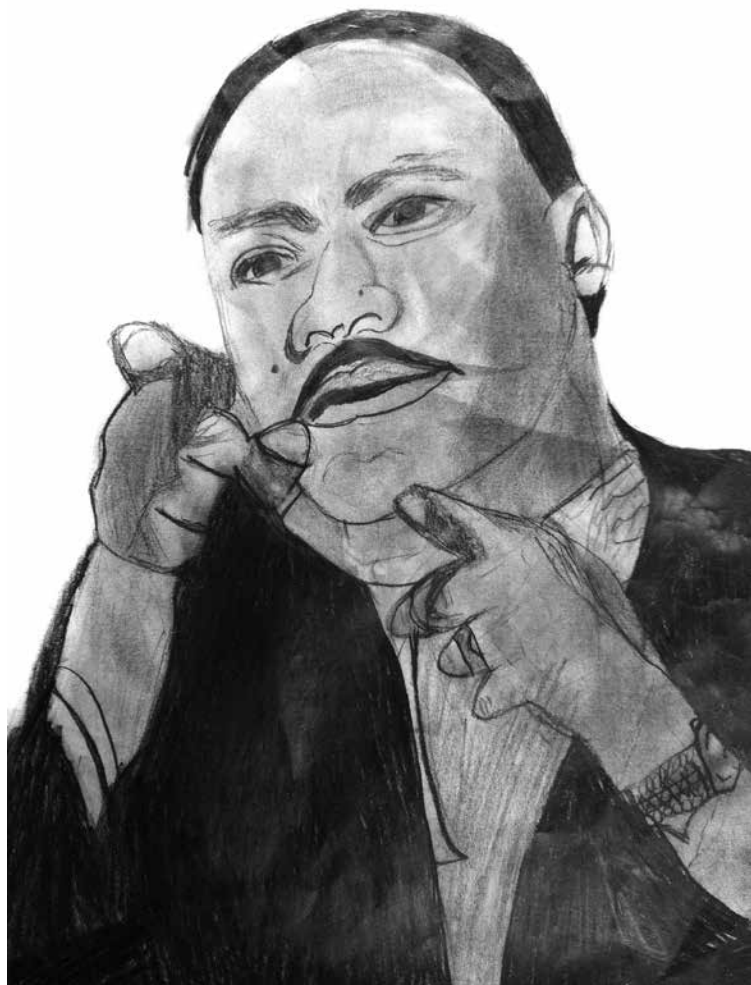
As a member of The Toronto Heschel School community for over 20 years, I have been incredibly inspired by Rabbi Heschel’s spiritual teachings and social activism. The big question for me, after all these years, is how these two aspects of Heschel’s work relate to one another. How, for Heschel, do Jewish spirituality and religion connect to social justice and responsible citizenship? And, most critically, what does this mean for teaching Jewish children?

From an educational perspective, Heschel’s most important teaching on knowledge is his notion of wonder, radical amazement, and awe. Heschel writes:

Wonder, not doubt, is the beginning of knowledge... Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement... [We should] 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.<sup>2</sup>

Heschel’s insight that wonder is the doorway to knowledge is a powerful invitation for educators to embrace theories of learning that encourage curiosity, discovery, and imagination. When Heschel says, “To be spiritual is to be amazed,” he reminds us that we experience God when we appreciate how every aspect of the world is amazing, even our own minds. Amazement is not a naive, pre-rational condition; rather, it is the highest form of perception. Amazement and wonder allow us to be aware of the “ineffable,” that which we cannot grasp by rational thought alone. Wonder is not just the beginning of Jewish knowledge, but of all knowledge. Maurice Friedman, an eminent Heschel scholar, observes that for Heschel, “insights into the ineffable are ‘the root of man’s creative activities in art, thought, and noble living.’”<sup>3</sup> a profound meta-cognitive worldview that educators should encourage and refine in their students.

**“Wonder, not doubt, is the beginning of knowledge.” Heschel’s insight encourages curiosity, discovery, and imagination, aligning ancient Jewish sources and progressive education today.**

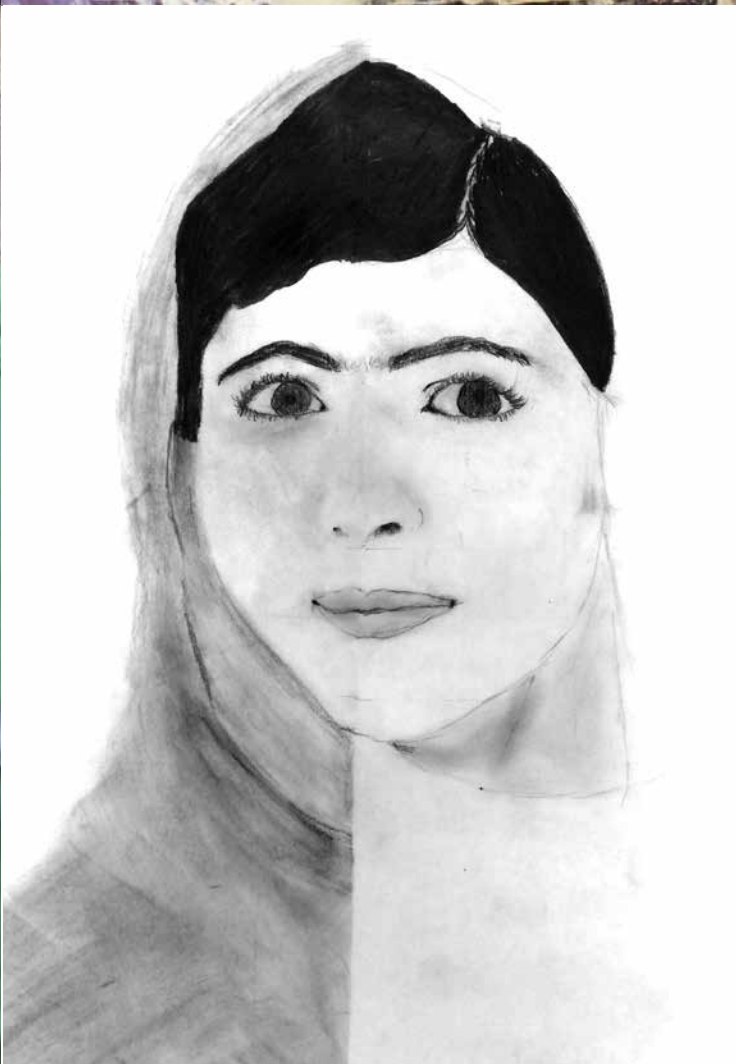


### Jewish Sources and Progressive Education

Heschel’s concept of wonder reveals an alignment between ancient Jewish sources and progressive educational theories today. Multiple intelligence theory, arts-based learning, and constructivism regard children as dynamic, creative thinkers and encourage these proclivities. Heschel also shows us how Judaism has its own ways of teaching that awaken wonder and nurture amazement.

The most powerful of these may be prayer, which Heschel emphasizes as a vehicle to identify, acknowledge, and appreciate the wonder of our very existence—in all its joys and sorrows. Prayers are songs that express our passion and amazement: “The primary purpose of prayer is not to make requests. The primary purpose of prayer is to praise, to sing, to chant. Because the essence of prayer is a song, and man cannot live without a song.”<sup>4</sup> While wonder and radical amazement are essential as the “beginning of knowledge,” and prayer serves them well, for Heschel they are not the only, or even the most important way a Jewish person relates to God. Later in life, Heschel delved into the prophetic tradition of Judaism, for which a relationship with God depends urgently on acts of social justice. From the prophets Heschel learned that, “Whatever I do to man, I do to God. When I hurt a human being, I injure God... The secret of our legacy,” he wrote, is “that God is implied in the human situation and that man must be involved in it.”<sup>5</sup>

Studying the prophets of Israel led Heschel to become increasingly active in the Civil Rights Movement, in the Anti-Vietnam War Movement, and in the struggle for Soviet Jewry. After marching from Selma to Montgomery with Reverend

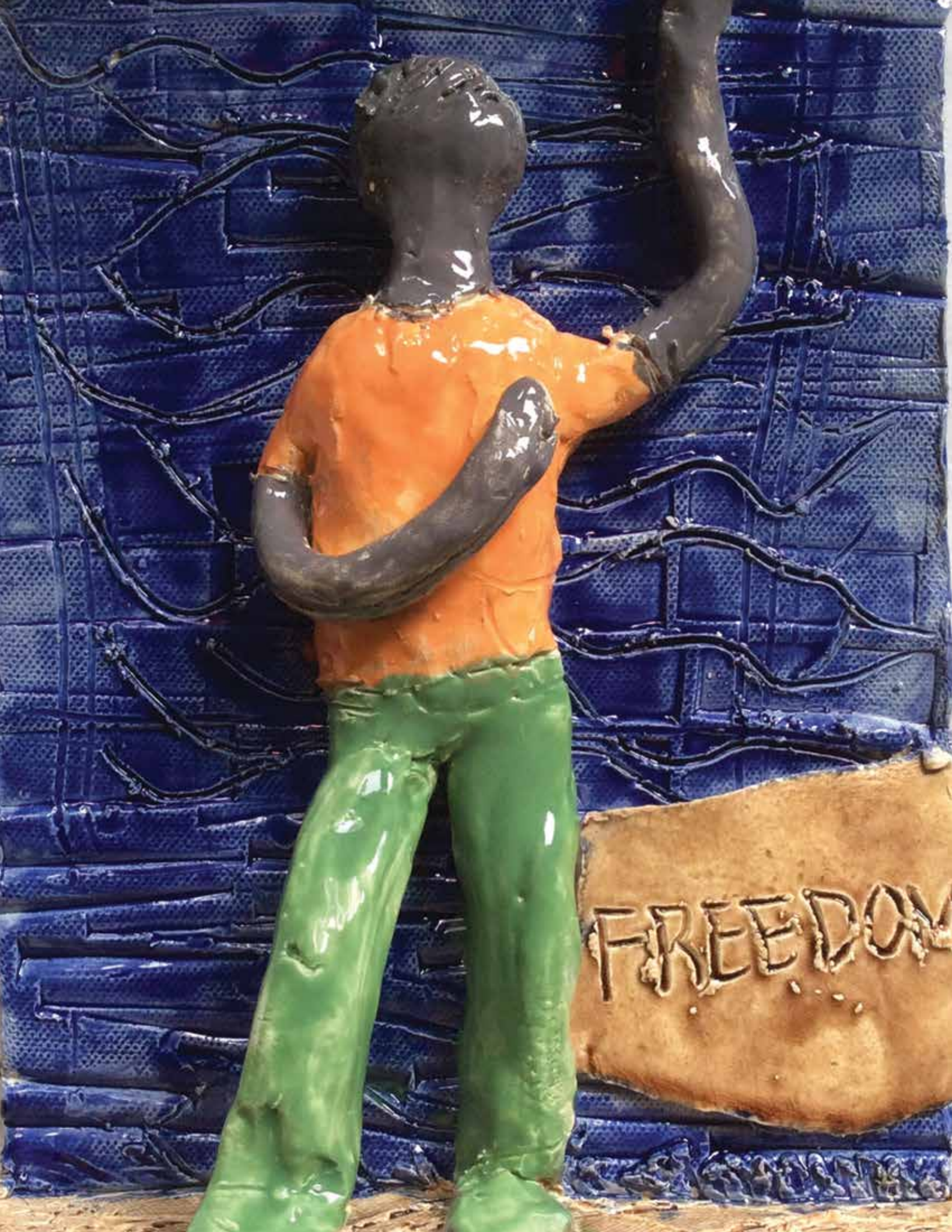


Martin Luther King Jr. and other religious leaders, Heschel declared, “I felt my legs were praying.”

One of the most valuable gifts Heschel offers Jewish educators is to show how Judaism and Jewish sources speak to relevant social issues in each generation. In his opening address to the National Conference of Christians and Jews in January 1963, Heschel drew a stark parallel between the Exodus narrative of the Torah and the Civil Rights Movement:

At the first conference on religion and race, the main participants were Pharaoh and Moses. Moses’ words were, “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, let My people go that they may celebrate a feast to me.” While Pharaoh retorted: “Who is the Lord that I should heed this voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and moreover I will not let Israel go.” The outcome of that summit meeting has not come to an end. Pharaoh is not ready to capitulate. The Exodus began, but is far from having been completed. In fact, it was easier for the children of Israel to cross the Red Sea than for a Negro to cross certain university campuses.<sup>6</sup>

At The Toronto Heschel School, we follow Heschel’s model and continuously draw our students’ attention to how Jewish sources speak to relevant social responsibility and social justice concerns. One Grade 5 integrated project asks students to match text from Exodus with passages from the novel *Underground to Canada*. A year-long Grade 8 human rights curriculum looks at text from *Sefer Devarim* (the Book of Deuteronomy) and the Talmud to address discrimination, child labour, and gender inequality today.



## Awe and Wonder

Every year I come to understand the connection between these two key aspects of Heschel's thinking, between perceiving awe and wonder in the world and engaging in acts of social justice. Every year I feel that I understand a little more why awe and wonder matter for social justice.

Through the lens of awe and wonder, we see how amazing the world is, how incredible, complex, and unique each human being is. We are driven to notice and feel concern for life and for the quality of each person's life. We realize that everyone should experience the fullness of the world's wonders, that no child should be deprived of meaningful education, that no human life should be wasted through war and poverty, and that no one should have to live with shame or fear. A state of awe and wonder leaves us realizing what really matters. We focus on the essential and disdain the trivial.

The lesson for educators is this: If children habituate to learning by rote—whether in math class, Torah class, or elsewhere—they meet life as rote and set. Their moral imaginations narrow and their sense of the possible remains limited to what already is. Conversely, when children habituate to learning through awe and wonder—whether in math class, Torah class, or elsewhere—they meet life as full of surprise and possibility. Their moral imaginations are more open to embrace what they value as feeling and searching individuals, and as Jews. Their sense of the possible expands to see that social injustice—discrimination, prejudice, and poverty—is not inevitable but entrenched by narrow, spiritless thinking. Awe and wonder inspire in students the desire to expand the awe and wonder in the world, for themselves and for others.

Teaching through awe and wonder creates the habits of heart and mind that inspire the work of social justice. Prayer not only reveals and expresses our amazement at the world. Prayer, writes Heschel, also “clarifies our hopes and intentions. It helps us discover our true aspirations, the pangs we ignore, the longings we forget...words of prayer are commitments. We stand for what we utter...prayer teaches us what to aspire to...the idea becomes a concern, something to be longed for, a goal to be reached, when we pray.”<sup>7</sup>

The ancient rabbis debated whether learning or action is more important; they concluded that learning comes first, because it leads to action. Linking Rabbi Heschel's concept of awe and wonder to social action, we see how the rabbinic equation works. Learning, which inspires awe and wonder and clarifies our aspirations, leads us to actions that can help us redeem the world from pettiness and selfishness.

Rabbi Heschel's life was a model of this integration. His is a “good name” for an inspired vision of Jewish education. His is the good name that we, at The Toronto Heschel School, strive to emulate.

1 Mishna, Pirkei Avot 4:17.

2 A.J. Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), Kindle Edition.

3 M. Friedman, A.J. Heschel, and E. Wiesel, *You Are My Witness* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987), p. 44.

4 S. Heschel, ed., *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* (New York: Noonday Press, 1996), p. 397.

5 A.J. Heschel, “The Plight of Russian Jews,” *United Synagogue Review* (1964).

6 A.J. Heschel, Opening Address to the National Conference of Christians and Jews, “Religion and Race,” January 1963.

7 A.J. Heschel, *I Asked for Wonder* (New York: Crossroads Publishing, 2006).

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

Learning through awe and wonder habituates children to meet life as full of surprise and possibility.



## How and Why Rabbi AJ Heschel Matters to Kids

BY PAM MEDJUCK STEIN

How do the footsteps of Rabbi Heschel lead to education that integrates Jewish learning, Jewish ritual, and social justice? Why does this matter?

### The Inexpressible Whole

Rabbi Heschel's teachings relate to the whole person. He taught that mind, body, and spirit meet in Judaism. Our educational approach is likewise holistic: Content, process, and practice are one.

Thinking about what's called interdisciplinary study helps to explain why this orientation matters; it contemplates training students to interrelate different topics and be alert to how aspects of each combine to make something new.

Heschel's writings jumped across genres. He didn't accept standard categories; he pierced through boundaries that confined fields of study and traditions of practice. For example, he connected spirituality to the indescribable soul but said his "legs were praying"; he emphasized ancient wisdom yet valued contemporary learning; he fought against the Vietnam War in the corridors of secular power as a religious battle.

Straddling disciplines and conventions, Heschel opened a new landscape in modern Jewish thought. We educate students to formulate understanding from the widest perspective: Can our daily manners reflect our Torah; can we see that biology relates to ethics; if the Israelite Exodus from Egypt informed the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, what is it doing for persecution today?

Heschel's synchronicity brings advantages to Jewish life—spiritually, culturally, politically, and socially. At school, it positions children to develop critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, and a sense of community—all-important skills for 21st-century learning.

We remember all that students  
“are able to be” and support their  
spirit and resolve as they build  
confidence and skill.

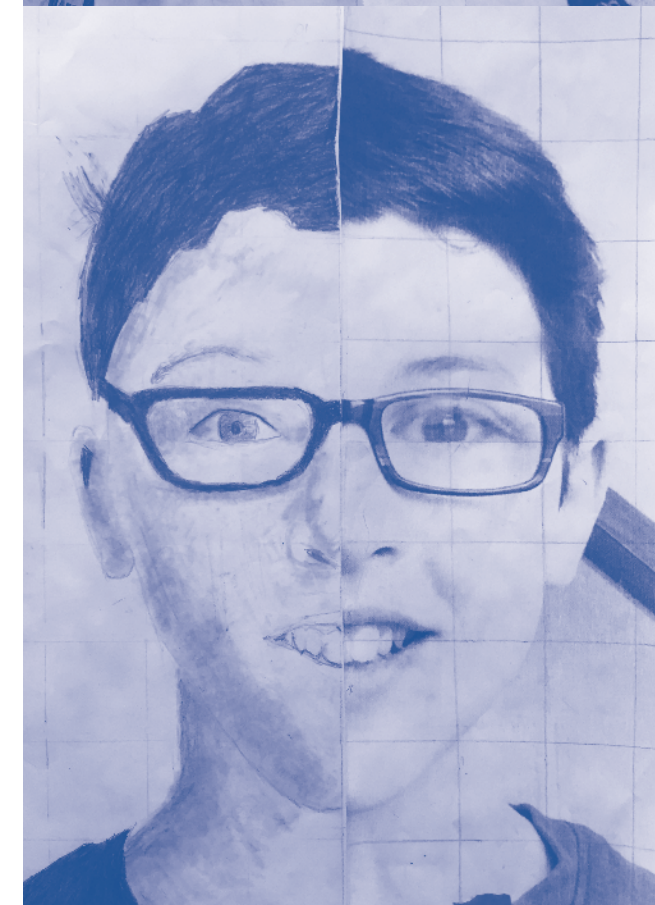
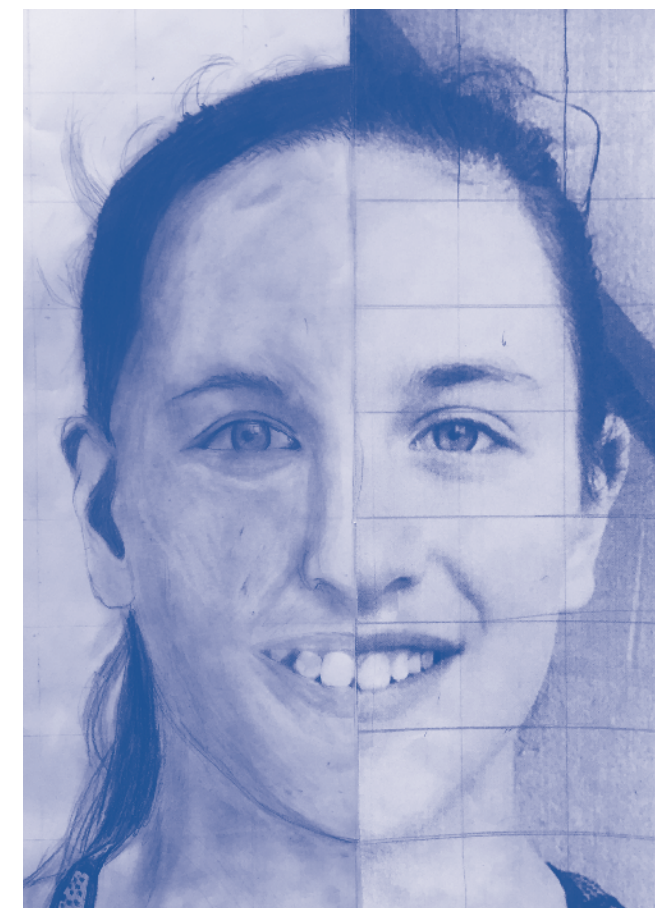
### Setting Up for Finding the Way

We want children to feel on the right track when they seek answers, even if they are unsure of the solutions. Heschel wrote, “The essence of [a child] is not what he is, but in what he is able to be.”<sup>1</sup> His work reminds us that Judaism offers 5,000+ years of dilemma and strategic response; it began with Abraham and Sarah and became a method to search for truth in the unknown territories where they ventured after Abraham smashed the idols. Whether students are struggling through second language learning or math, they are in unexplored terrain. We remember all that they “are able to be” and support their spirit and their resolve as they build confidence and skill.

Rabbi Heschel once concluded a speech with the following story taken from an eighteenth-century Hebrew book:

A young man once wanted to become a blacksmith. So he became an apprentice to a blacksmith, and he learned all the necessary techniques of the trade—how to hold the tongs, how to lift the sledge, how to smite the anvil, even how to blow the fire with the bellows. Having finished his apprenticeship, he was chosen to be employed at the smithery of the royal palace. However, the young man's delight soon came to an end, when he discovered that he had failed to learn how to kindle a spark. All his skill and knowledge in handling the tools were of no avail.

I am often embarrassed when I discover that I am myself like that apprentice—that I know facts and I know techniques, but I have failed to learn how to kindle a spark. I conclude, therefore, with the hope that you who work in the royal smithery of Jewish education will each of you be able to kindle a spark.<sup>2</sup>





## The Jewish Lens and Jewish Identity

The footsteps of Rabbi Heschel are a roadmap to Jewish identity. He believed that to be a good Jew one must live as a good citizen of the world, active in the concern for justice. Heschel extolled the good deeds themselves rather than the performance of them. It's not who we are that matters; it's what we do. From him we learn that identity is a consequence of action. An early building block to Jewish identity is for our students to learn to evaluate what is good and what is not. The capacity to ascertain this is the key. Heschel wrote, "An act is not good because we feel obliged to do it; it is rather that we feel obliged to do it because it is good."<sup>4</sup>

A school's activities, culture, and priorities role model identity to the young who walk its halls. Our students understand that keeping the school a Platinum Level Eco-School is a Jewish act; the little ones audit the waste and Junior Highs create a Pesach Eco-Seder demonstrating that ecological responsibility is part of our freedom and therefore also a Jewish act. Bringing *mishloach manot* (the sending of portions) to the homeless on Purim is a valuable expression of remembering that the endangered need protection. Mindful care for a garden over the school year starting with the earliest grade is also a Jewish act, and noticing the wonders of

nature with awe is how we appreciate creation. What we do is who we are.

These and many other carefully stewarded activities coalesce over the years to foster in students a conscious Jewish lens, meaning an awareness of the Jewishness of a certain point of view. The idea of a Jewish lens develops an ingrained resourceful Jewish identity as children see the world and themselves active in it. As they develop a strong sense of self, knowing who they are, and what they stand for, students carry their ethics and intentions with awareness and comfort, and do not feel threatened by beliefs different from their own. They will step forward; which is something we nurture attentively in their Junior High years.

- 1 A.J. Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1963), Kindle Edition.
- 2 A.J. Heschel, "The Spirit of Jewish Education," *Jewish Education*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Fall 1953), p. 62.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- 4 A.J. Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1976), Kindle Edition.

**Pam Medjuck Stein** is Chair of The Lola Stein Institute and Editor of THINK Magazine.



## Personal Responsibility and Critical Thinking

Research and discovery require solid evidence and scholarship respects primary sources. Heschel's devotion to ancient text mirrors this high standard as does his practice to interpret fresh meaning for a contemporary world. His attention to primary sources introduces students to critical thinking. From a very young age, students' nurture the habit to check their information, go back to the source.

To strengthen thinking skills, we ground school curriculum in Jewish learning and tell Chumash narratives as told in the original text, as primary source material. The method

embeds Torah stories and lessons in children's memories, which inspires confidence and faith in their tradition as well as cultivates their foundational skills for assessing evidence and making an analysis.

In addition, the Jewish technique to re-examine Torah stories over and over teaches the children—and reminds the adults—that while the story is the same, there is always more to discover and learn. So we look again and again. Heschel said, "The unique attitude of the Jew is not the love of knowledge but the love of studying."<sup>5</sup>

**Heschel said, "The unique attitude of the Jew is not the love of knowledge but the love of studying."**





# Philosophy in Action at The Toronto Heschel School

DVORA GOODMAN

## The Whole Child

The Toronto Heschel School features integration on many levels: The school sees the child as a whole person, whose social, physical, intellectual, and spiritual development is understood as an interconnected adaptive process. There's an integrated curriculum, in which different academic disciplines—math, history, science, Chumash, French, Talmud, English, and Hebrew—are taught in tandem such that they each mutually reinforce concepts learned in the others.

*THINK Issue #21: "School of Salmon"*  
by Greg Beiles



## Ethical Choices: *Derech Eretz*

A school-wide program called *Middat Hashavuah* (Weekly Measure) weaves the concept of *derech erez*—the road of ethical living—deeply into our school culture.

In each week's Torah portion, we find an example of an ethical action which can serve as a measure of who we are. We post it prominently in every classroom and around the school and focus our attention on finding ways to practice this particular *middah* (measure) throughout our day all week long.

Measuring ourselves involves self-reflection, self-understanding, and practising how we interact respectfully and thoughtfully with others. We are able to measure ourselves through reflection on our interactions with others and through our own responses.

Heschel FAQs: What Is Middat Hashavuah? <https://www.torontoheschel.org/community/heschel-faqs-what-is-middat-hashavuah>



## Community and Purpose

The Toronto Heschel School requires an activated culture. Enter the *Chevra* Committee. (Note that *chevra* is the Hebrew word for friendship; the word for community is *kehillah*.) The school understands that a community grows where friendships are real; the aspiration being the whole child, whole school, whole family.

The direction that the *Chevra* Committee took over the years was to create a sense of home at school. The Committee's investment in the school's philosophies and the way it bridges curriculum and extra-curricular go far beyond the usual PTA bake sales and carnivals. Just as values lived at home inform who a child becomes, the way a school departs itself has an impact on each student.

When the *Chevra* Committee organizes an initiative, school ethics shape the event. Our *Chevra* celebrates, activates, and reaffirms outside the classroom what's going on inside. There is always a "Heschelian" intentionality of purpose, such as a waffle breakfast in the school *Sukka* welcoming newcomers and returning families alike after the summer break in the spirit of hospitality, which is central to the holiday of Sukkot.

*THINK* Issue #28; "Invisible Thread: Did You Know That Chevra Means a Circle of Friends?" by Ava Kwinter

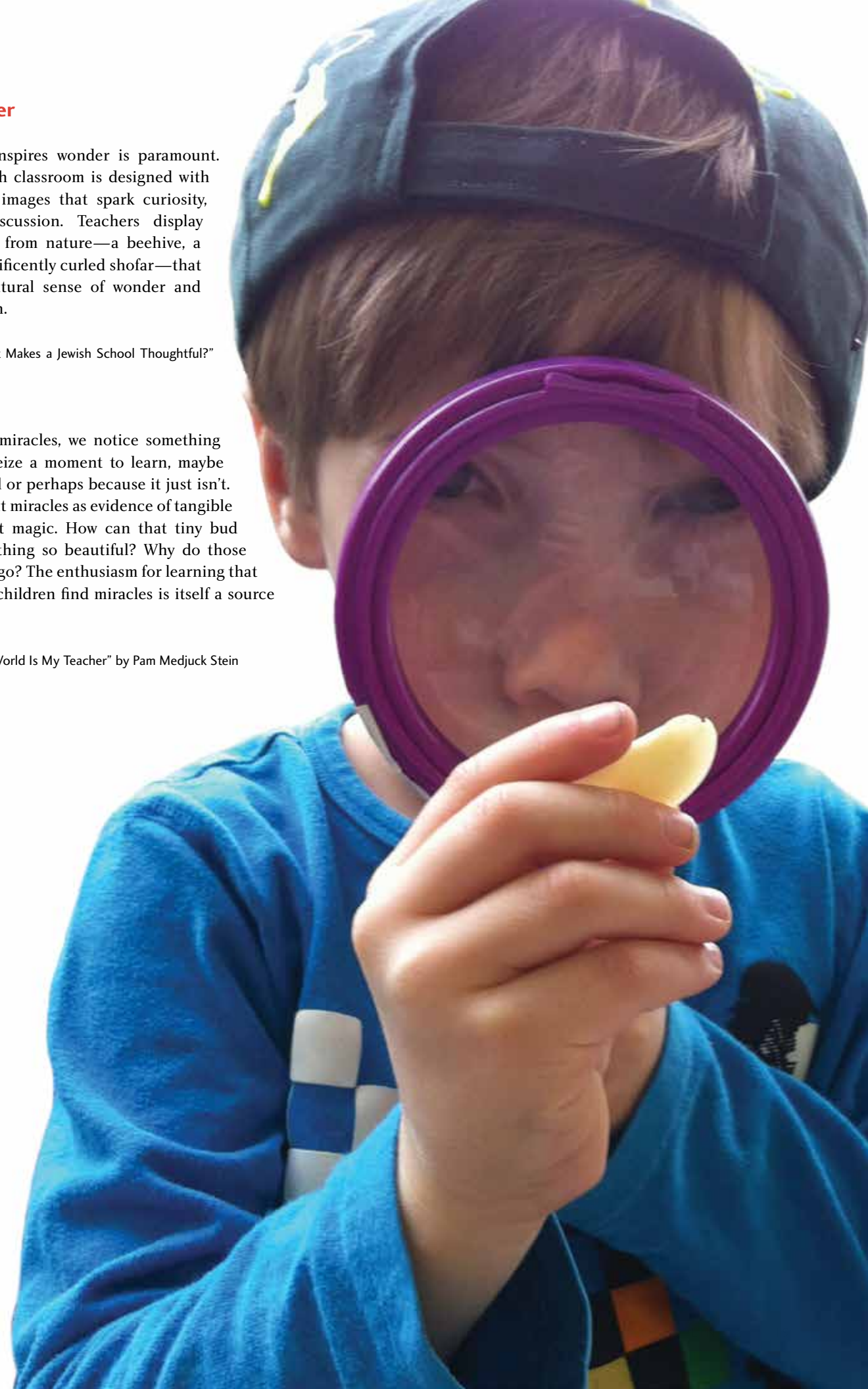
## Awe and Wonder

A classroom that inspires wonder is paramount. For this reason each classroom is designed with objects, texts, and images that spark curiosity, questions, and discussion. Teachers display remarkable objects from nature—a beehive, a conch shell, a magnificently curled shofar—that evoke children's natural sense of wonder and inspire investigation.

*THINK* Issue #14; "What Makes a Jewish School Thoughtful?" by Greg Beiles

We don't proclaim miracles, we notice something extra-special and seize a moment to learn, maybe because it's unusual or perhaps because it just isn't. Our teachers present miracles as evidence of tangible natural change, not magic. How can that tiny bud blossom into something so beautiful? Why do those ants know where to go? The enthusiasm for learning that materializes as the children find miracles is itself a source of inspiration.

*THINK* Issue #21; "The World Is My Teacher" by Pam Medjuck Stein





## Individuality and Mutual Respect

The school's pluralistic philosophy emerges from Heschel's experience across the denominations. His thinking echoes the phrase "We were all at Sinai," the traditional Jewish notion that each Jew was present to hear the revelation of the Torah and, therefore, each has something authentic to contribute to its understanding and fulfillment. Heschel recognized that each stream of Judaism has something to offer.

Inspired by this respect for the individual, each child at The Toronto Heschel School is recognized as a legitimate contributor to classroom discourse. From the very beginning, classroom seating is arranged in a circle or small groupings so that the children face one another, respecting the unique contribution of each child's questions and comments. These practices of respect for the learner and his/her contributions have made Heschel students recognizable beyond our walls. We hear that Heschel students ask the best questions when on field trips with students from other schools and that our graduates' questions stand out in their high school classes.

THINK Issue #14; "What Makes a Jewish School Thoughtful?" by Greg Beiles

## Environmental Education

The Toronto Heschel garden invites children to explore, play, 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.

The school's environmental ethos stems from a commitment to respect the earth. The garden mirrors this vision. It didn't sprout overnight but was thoughtfully and meticulously planned.

Our garden generates awe and wonder, pride and delight in all its stewards—students, teachers, families. In the spirit of Rabbi Heschel, we embrace the full load of our responsibilities: care for the earth and for each other.

THINK Issue #22; "The Bounty of a School Garden" by Lisa Rendely

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

## Studying Text

Whether ancient or recent, words hand-inked on Torah parchment flow across the scroll from beginning to end without vowels, punctuation, or paragraphs. Rewritten in books, they are accessorized with black dots and squiggles: some markings are vowels, others are musical notes. Without this code of supportive instructions, the words of Torah would remain indecipherable to most people. It deciphers whether a particular Torah moment is melancholy or joyous, strident or fearful, resounding or ephemeral. Our tradition understands that how words are expressed will shape what they mean.

THINK Issue #25; "The Spirit of the Word" by Pam Medjuck Stein

Grade 5 students examine *Sefer Shemot* (the Book of Exodus) as detectives looking for clues; they search the text for "knots," or *kesharim*: moments of enslavement, despair, or loss of humanity. Such moments might include Moshe watching Hebrews as they are whipped by a taskmaster, or Pharaoh hardening his heart and denying freedom as the plagues escalate.

They also explore for "loops," or *lula'ot*: moments of hope, humanity, or possibility. Each small circumstance in the narrative may be a loosening, a crack that opens the door to freedom, if ever so slightly: Miriam, Yocheved, and the midwives save Moshe from the Nile; Moshe notices and approaches the burning bush; slaves run under cover of night taking with them unleavened bread.

THINK Issue #24; "Weaving Narratives" by Lisa Rendely



# Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

CROSSOVER ARTIST

BY RABBI BARUCH FRYDMAN-KOHL

Heschel presented an alternative way of thinking about reality and religion.

**D**reamgirls tells the story of the Supremes and their crossover as the first all-female Black group into mainstream success. Bob Dylan fused bluegrass and folk, and Yo-Yo Ma brought together European classical and Chinese music. James Rudin has observed that Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel also was a “crossover phenomenon.”

## The Background to His Artistry

Born into the Hasidic world of pre-World War I Warsaw, Heschel was related to nearly all the great Hasidic teachers of Eastern Europe... Following a traditional rabbinic education, and encouraged by his mother, Heschel “crossed over” to study secular subjects in a Vilna high school, [and later]...to study philosophy, art history, and ancient Semitics at the University of Berlin.<sup>1</sup>

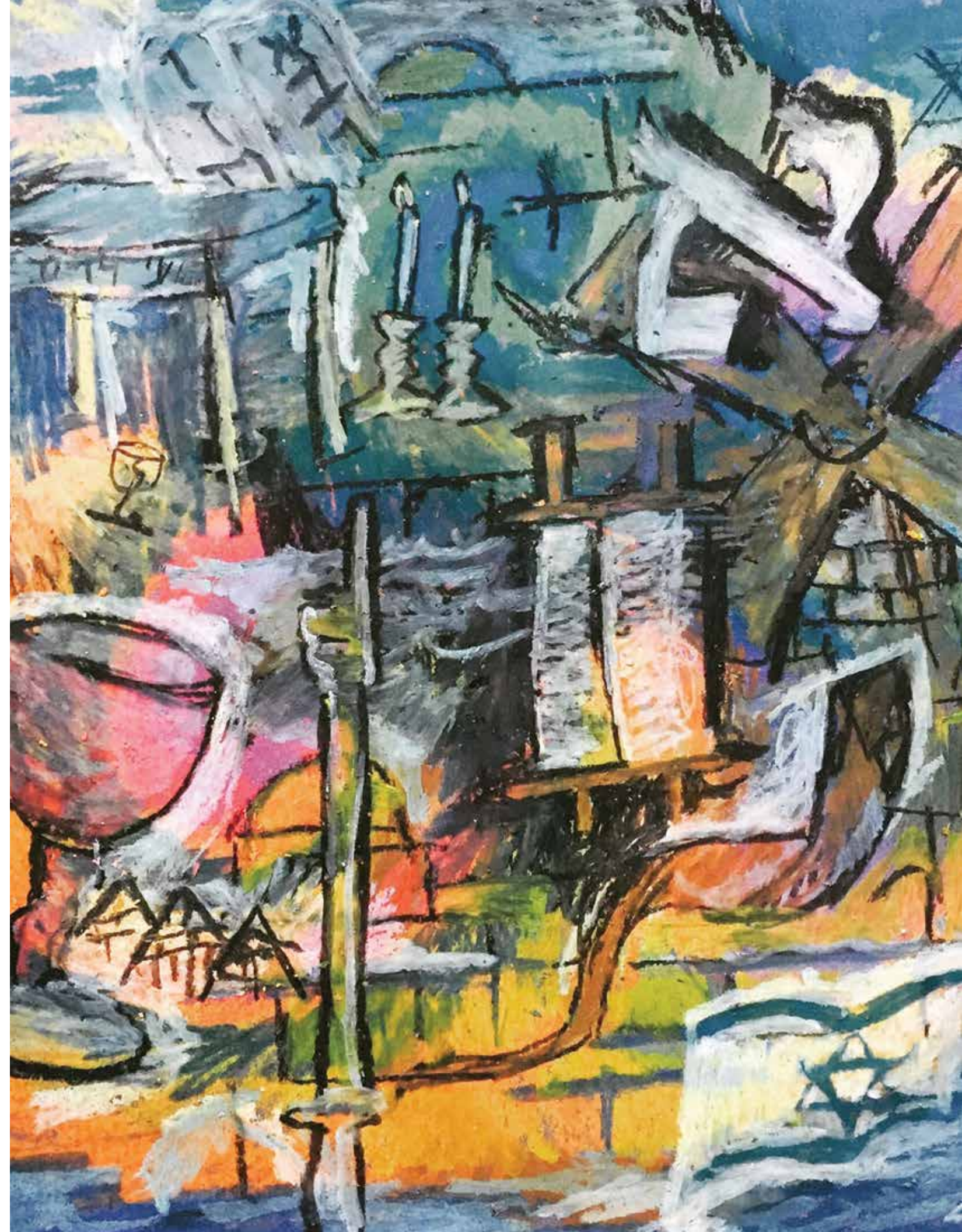
Heschel also taught adult Jewish education, at the Lehrhaus, founded by Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig. He tried to demonstrate that the intellectual achievements of the greatest thinkers were linked to their inner personal struggles. He hoped to stimulate the spiritual lives of German Jews, offering support in their despair.

## Crossing to America

In 1938, Heschel was deported from Berlin to Warsaw. He would likely have disappeared in the Holocaust had not Julian Morgenstern of Hebrew Union College secured five visas for European Jewish scholars, and one was for Heschel. Years later, Heschel described himself as a “brand plucked from the fire.”

Heschel came to Cincinnati in 1940 as a Hebrew instructor at the Reform seminary. He learned English, maintained *kashrut* in a student dormitory, wrote some significant scholarly essays, and unsuccessfully tried to save family members from Hitler’s hatred.

In 1945, uncomfortable at Hebrew Union College, which minimized Jewish law and tradition, Heschel crossed again, this time to the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) in New York. While his interest in Jewish ethics and mysticism was often disparaged by the Seminary’s powerful Talmudists, Heschel earned international acclaim for his synthesis of traditional Jewish knowledge with the modern world. The former Chancellor of JTS, Arnold Eisen, says that Heschel saved Judaism for his generation.





## Religion and Activism

Heschel translated the prophets' passion into decades of activism for social justice. Speaking about the struggle for civil rights in America, Heschel said, "It was far easier for the children of Israel to cross the Red Sea" than for Black Americans "to cross certain university campuses."

In June 1963, Heschel sent a telegram to President Kennedy saying the quest for racial justice called for "moral grandeur and spiritual audacity." After a Friday phone call from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Heschel took a flight the following Saturday evening to join the march from Selma to Montgomery in Alabama. He said, "I felt my legs were praying."

Heschel also crossed the schism between Jews and Christians. During the Second Vatican Council in Rome (1962–1965), he flew secretly to meetings at the Vatican, nurturing the historic declaration that forever changed Catholic-Jewish relations; the Church no longer cited the goal to convert Jews to Christianity.

Heschel was an early supporter of the movement to free Soviet Jewry and an early opponent of the Vietnam War, angering many when he said that the war offered Americans the choice between "losing face or losing our souls."

## From Observance and Philosophy to Awe and Wonder

Heschel was not satisfied with historical accounts of what important Jewish thinkers had written about Judaism. Nor did he interpret Judaism to follow existing models of philosophical or social thought. Instead, Rabbi Heschel drew deeply from Jewish sources, explored the human experience, and presented an alternative way of thinking about reality and religion.

He wrote that religious thought was a unique way of thinking and should not be reduced to sociology, psychology, or philosophy. He identified the categories of thought by which religion, in general, and Judaism, in particular, might understand itself "in terms of its own spirit." He said that authentic religion "begins as a breaking off, a going away. It continues in acts of non-conformity to idolatry."

Heschel called his approach "depth theology," a search for wonder and radical self-amazement. He sought to leave "religious behaviorism" behind, and to "nurse the song in the recesses of the soul."



## A Few Personal Notes

From the depths of the Jewish tradition, Heschel spoke to the issues that America faced in the late 1960s and early 1970s. American Judaism was caught up in ethnic and communal concerns and Heschel was speaking about God. He influenced me and many other young rabbis and initiated a shift in the language of the pulpit as we gradually adjusted our focus from Holocaust survival and Israel awareness to more God-talk and textual study.

## The Intellectual and the Spiritual

Heschel crossed through time wondering how teachers of the past faced the same universal and Jewish challenges that vexed his own soul. By 1930, Heschel had already described Maimonides' "inner wrestling," and in the 1940s, he wrote about Saadia Gaon's search for self-understanding, saying, "We should not regard them as mirrors, reflecting other people's problems, but rather as windows, allowing us to view the author's soul."

In his last work, *Passion for Truth*, Heschel describes his own struggle to balance the inclusive compassion of the founder of Hasidism, Yisrael Baal Shem Tov, with the elitist demand for integrity of Menachem Mendel of Kotsk, a later Hasidic master. To this day, I still struggle with how to stand for the normative structure of traditional Judaism while opening up to welcome those on the periphery of Jewish life.

Heschel's approach to spiritual teachings was radically new. He made me see that the great teachers of Judaism were not academicians responding to textual questions disconnected from daily life. They were living men facing real-life situations.

Rabbi Heschel had scholarly imagination and the rare capacity to link his immense erudition to life. Discussing his book *The Prophets*, he observed, "I've learned from the prophets that I have to be involved in the affairs of man, in the affairs of suffering man."



**His personalization of the great thinkers of Judaism was an entirely original orientation.**

### Unity and Paradox

In his great work on rabbinic theology, *Heavenly Torah: As Refracted through the Generations*, Heschel argues against a unitary model of Judaism. He explores the tension in Jewish thought between the poetic, mystical approach of Rabbi Akiva and the rational, contextual method of Rabbi Yishmael. He attributes the vibrancy of Judaism to this polarity. He writes:

Paradox is an essential way of understanding the world, history and nature. Strife, tension, contradiction characterize all of reality... There is a polarity in everything except God. For all tension ends in God. He is beyond all dichotomies.

Heschel identifies three paths to God: the Bible, with its midrashic record of revelation; the natural world, whose wonders lead to radical amazement; and sacred deeds, when "by doing the finite we attain the infinite." He contends that our actions "must be carried out as variations on the theme of prayer"; that every *mitzvah* we do is "a prayer in the form of a deed." Prayer helps us see ourselves as witnesses of God; we then understand what it means to be "in the divine image" and we realize our true vocation in good deeds.

Heschel's vivid evocative language opens the inner world of prayer, Shabbat, and the world of *mitzvot* for others to see. He uncovered the link between religious belief and social concern. Of all of Heschel's teachings, what is most beloved to me is how he connected internal Jewish authenticity to contemporary life.

Our ancestor Abraham was called *ivri*, meaning the one who "crossed over," from polytheism and Haran to monotheism and the land of Israel. Rabbi Heschel was a contemporary crossover artist who came from pre-war Europe to speak to a post-Holocaust world. His vision of Torah bridges the intellectual, social, and theological divides of contemporary society. His mastery of classical philosophy and Kabbalah, Hasidic thought, and contemporary ethics, was linked to an esteem for the biblical prophets, a love for the State of Israel, and a reverence for all people. Rabbi Heschel crossed many boundaries and built many bridges.

1 This excerpt is taken from "Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel Interview Clips." YouTube, June 24, 2008. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4xTAh2tixLc>.

**Rabbi Baruch Frydman-Kohl** is Rabbi Emeritus of Beth Tzedec Congregation. Originally appeared in *THINK Issue #9*, Spring/Summer 2011.



# A Founding Vision

BY GAIL BAKER, CO-FOUNDER

**W**e started off imagining who we wanted a Toronto Heschel graduate to be. We figured that if we could reach children spiritually, it would connect them to their Jewish roots and to living Jewishly.

Rabbi Heschel showed us the way. Steeped in the teachings of the Hebrew prophets, he fought for civil rights because it was the Jewish thing to do. He famously denounced a debate on the *kashrut* of Jell-O because it would be a more animated exchange than a debate on the *kashrut* of nuclear disarmament. He looked at the world through Jewish eyes and he inspired us. We envisioned graduates who would be Jewishly oriented, actively engaged, and democratic citizens, and who, like Rabbi Heschel, would see the universal through the particular. He became our teacher.

**Our graduates would be Jewishly oriented, actively engaged, and democratic citizens.**

I'm also often asked how Rabbi Heschel's teachings are reflected in what the school does. I answer, if given enough time, which is not often the case, that the subtle process of infusing his influence widely is planned and intentional. We developed an original curriculum specifically for the Early Years students and we built it year by year until it reached Grade 8, distilling Rabbi Heschel's philosophies and attitudes throughout. We committed to a very particular school culture and ethos. For example, we dispensed with the traditional Jewish day school model, which bifurcates the school day between general studies in the morning and Jewish education in the afternoon; our schedule integrated Jewish and universal topics all day long and within all classes. Our students, no matter their background, would wear a head covering at all times, acknowledging the Jewish ethics and values permeating all they were doing, whether they were in math class, playing outside, or studying Torah. If asked which Jewish denomination he belonged to, Rabbi Heschel would answer that he was a Jew. He rejected silos

and movements that compartmentalized the Jewish community, and our school broke ground as a fully pluralistic Jewish day school in Toronto. These moves were very much following in his footsteps.

Now, more than a quarter of a century later, I am happy to have these conversations. I feel it's important to share our original purpose because understanding the school's educational vision for Jewish children is what we are all about. As one of the school founders, I can vouch for the simple fact that we used Rabbi Heschel's view of Judaism as an organizational method for our school; his Judaism interrelates and integrates Jewish learning, ritual, and social justice and so does the school. Rabbi Heschel has shown how current and how future-focused our ancient Jewish tradition can be. Likewise, while our school, which is research-based, pays close attention to emerging pedagogical discoveries, it thoughtfully weaves relevant new insight into the learning traditions we continue to build. Telling our story revisits the educational compass that has guided our school towards amazing productivity and *awesome, wonderful* graduates.

**Rabbi Heschel rejected silos in the Jewish community, and our school broke ground as a fully pluralistic Jewish day school.**

Rabbi Heschel gave a eulogy at Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s funeral. After the service, mourning the loss of a great leader, one of Heschel's students tearfully turned to him and said: "Rabbi, what do we do now?" Without hesitation, Heschel responded: "We teach the children, so that they can remake the world." Today, in 2022, I am grateful that The Toronto Heschel School continues to honour Rabbi Heschel and remains dedicated to his teachings.

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**Gail Baker** co-founded The Toronto Heschel School in 1996 and served as Head of School from 2001 until she retired in 2014.



# School Spirit, the AJ Heschel Way

AN INTERVIEW WITH  
RACHAEL TURKIENICZ, CO-FOUNDER

**THINK:** Where do you see Abraham Joshua Heschel in our school?

**RACHAEL:** Rav Heschel's view of how individuals relate to their community shaped our vision of a new school. Talmudic discussions acknowledge that tensions arise in these relationships: I can be spiritual, but does that mean that I join a community? Or the opposite—I like going to shul, but I am not good at personal relationships.

Rav Heschel started at the core of the individual and moved outwards. He talked about spiritual absenteeism as something that individuals are missing from the world. He'd say that we bring our technology to everything, but we are not easy with expressions of spirituality; we worry that we might be judged because we are unsure if the modern world has a place for our spiritual expressions.

The spirit needs to find its equal expression and we can't assume that we are born knowing how to do this. We have to learn. How do I refine and define my personal expression inwardly, and then refine it again. And then how do I connect outwardly and learn the skill to bring my personal expressions to broader venues—family, community, the world. Focusing on the inside story is core to what Rav Heschel brings to our school.

**THINK:** How does a spiritual path as Rav Heschel describes it begin to open? What does the experience look like?

**RACHAEL:** The way that I can continuously engage is to challenge myself with wonder, connection, exploration, the idea of hearing everything I can hear. I know that I won't like everything I'm hearing and my skill will lie in understanding that hearing everything I can hear allows me to grow and hear more connections, to challenge myself, to enlarge. This is what we want for our kids.

As parents during the school's first days, when we watched our kids ignite, we grew close to each other. We became a community. We sensed that we were part of an experiment. We were living moment to moment. The intentionality bonded us as parents.

We decided to do our version of the play *Fiddler on the Roof*. At an after-school rehearsal, parents were waiting for their young children, watching, standing around the periphery of our largest room. The tiny performers were singing the Friday night *bracha*, "May the Lord protect and defend you." Every parent was crying. It wasn't pride. It was the shared wonder. We entered that moment together, and our kids led us there. We couldn't have entered it without them. Nobody needed to apologize for their tears. We walked out with a connection that couldn't have happened otherwise. It was the experiential outcome that Rav Heschel had been talking about.

**THINK:** How did Rav Heschel's pluralism show up at the school? How did a pan-denominational Jewish school in a city where there were none find its legs?

**RACHAEL:** We worked hard not to have a brand. No group would influence our school or define us.

Rav Heschel celebrated different expressions of Judaism and did not define himself in terms of denominations or institutions. He opened his home and the Jewish lifestyles and practices of all who entered were validated, welcomed, and explored.

We tried to create a language within the walls of the school with words that would allow for spiritual discussion, such as speaking in terms of our *neshama* (our soul). The word "religious" as in a religious Jewish day school was and is hard to define, express, or share.

In those days I taught at other schools as well as ours, and I heard what people outside the school were thinking about what we were trying to do. Hearing responses such as "It's doomed," I remember asking, "Why is it doomed?" I was told, "Well, if you stand for everything, then you stand for nothing."

They didn't understand. It was an experiment that people on the outside couldn't quite pierce or understand, but being on the inside, we knew the core. We knew we would figure out the pieces; we fully understood the core and we were watching our kids respond and flourish.

**THINK:** How is Rav Heschel's description of spirituality reflected in daily life? How do you see it in the school?

**RACHAEL:** Rav Heschel was committed to the uniqueness of every soul. He would say that identity as a group identity—as Jews—is that we are a people who cherish every single child's potential. At Toronto Heschel, we still want every student to graduate having heard something different about what life means, as a part of the nation of Israel who hears something that is uniquely theirs.

Mission holds appeal. It keeps us on track. We are happy to say we want our children to understand Judaism and have religious expression, but, as Rav Heschel understood, we are uncomfortable articulating what that means.

Saying we are a religious school, we situate our identity in our souls. What The Toronto Heschel School is doing is providing the skills, vocabulary, and tools to help a child formulate that, express that, and find the fit.

**THINK:** How does it feel to look back at the origins of the school? Where do you see it now?

**RACHAEL:** I feel that Rav Heschel would be supportive of our process and encouraged by what the school is doing. It is a process of growth. We are not sitting here decades later saying hurrah, we did it! We are not giving out accolades. We're not headed there. We are looking introspectively and standing at the precipice of a growth stage, continuing renewal rather than stagnation.

Intellectual life remains internal. Religious life starts internally but goes out. Jewish religious life gives me a structure that fits me. I don't need to force my way in or blindly follow, I will know. By opening up to the latitude of things, I am allowing myself to find my known space so that I can see it within the latitude of everything. That is religion. That is why it is so strong. Rav Heschel still speaks to me.

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**Rachael Turkienicz** is co-founder of the The Toronto Heschel School, founder of Rachael's Centre for Torah, Mussar, and Ethics, and serves as Clergy Educator at Beth Torah Congregation.



# The Artist at Work

THROUGH MORAH JUDY'S WORDS AND HER ATTENTION TO RABBI A.J. HESCHEL'S WORDS, WE SEE THE EXPANSE OF HER COMMITMENT TO THE MINDSET OF THE CREATIVE ARTIST, THE JOY OF ORIGINAL EXPRESSION, AND THE REWARD OF DISCIPLINE AND TECHNIQUE.

This article originally appeared in *THINK Issue #22*, Spring 2018.

Judith Leitner co-founded The Toronto Heschel School in 1996 and served as its Director of Integrated Arts until she retired in 2020.



**R**av Heschel is Rabbi A.J. Heschel, z"l (1907–1972), the spiritual mentor and social action role model of The Toronto Heschel School. His art was to combine the philosophical and the concrete, the most holy and the most mundane. His words here are taken from his spoken and printed publications.

**Morah Judy:** *Derech erez* (the ethical path) is a habit of mind, the empathy for fellow artists' diverse learning styles and creative choices.

**Rav Heschel:** The problem to be faced is how to combine loyalty to one's own tradition with reverence for different traditions. (*Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, 1996)



**Morah Judy:** We connect to great thinkers and artists; we see ourselves as in their lives and times, and know they are just like us.

**Rav Heschel:** Authentic thinking originates with an encounter with the world... (*Who Is Man?* 1965)

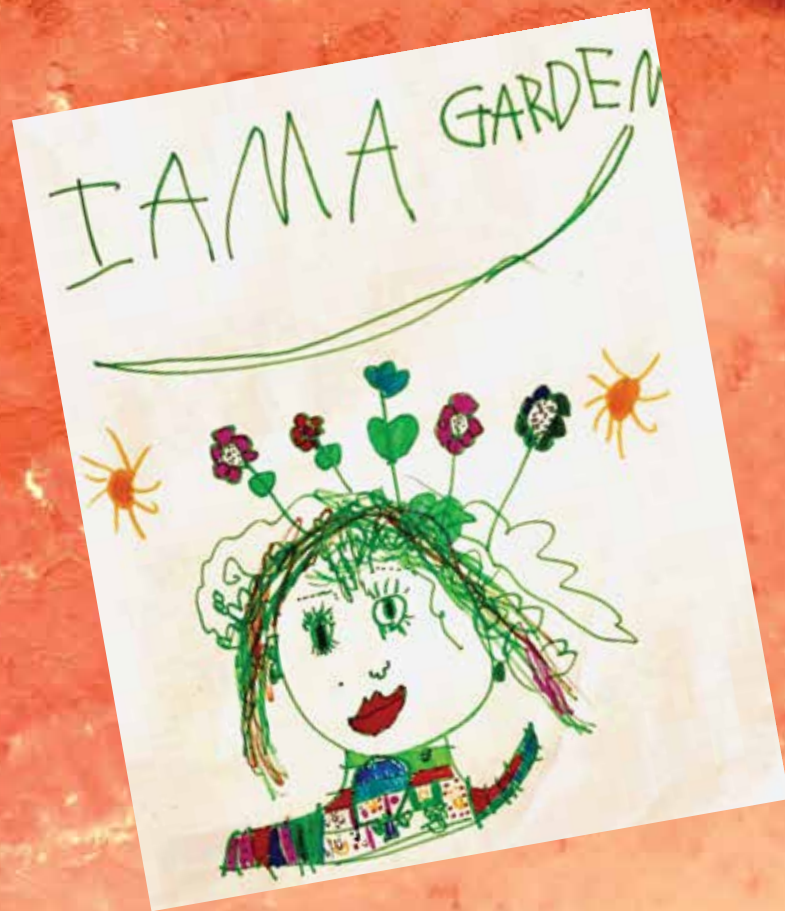


**Morah Judy:** As artists, we express our humanity: our evolutions, passions, vulnerabilities, and imaginings.

**Rav Heschel:** For many of us, the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lips and walking is not kneeling, and yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying. (Letter to Martin Luther King Jr., 1965, post Selma-Montgomery Civil Rights March)

**Morah Judy:** Judaism is a window into ourselves, and equally, onto the world we live in.

**Rav Heschel:** I have one talent, and that is the capacity to be tremendously surprised, surprised at life, at ideas. (Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity, 1996)



**Morah Judy:** The sketchbook is an essential artist's tool...for imagining, exploring creative possibilities, developing the skill to reference models, to plan, and to find one's unique voice.

**Rav Heschel:** ...the principle to be kept in mind is to know what we see, rather than to see what we know. (The Prophets, 1955/2001)

**Morah Judy:** Creativity fuses inspiration with technique, the opposing spirits of spontaneity and repeated deliberate practise.

**Rav Heschel:** There is a specific difficulty of Jewish prayer. There are laws: how to pray, when to pray, what to pray...fixed times, fixed ways, fixed texts. On the other hand, prayer is worship of the heart, the outpouring of the soul, a matter of *kavanah* (inner devotion)... Our great problem...is how not to let the principle of regularity impair the power of spontaneity. (Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity, 1996)



# INSPIRING CURIOSITY AND COURAGE



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