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# THiNK

THE  
LOLA  
STEIN  
INSTITUTE  
JOURNAL

Conversation about Education, Ethics, and Our Children



## THE MARVEL OF METHOD

ANNOUNCING THE LOLA STEIN TEACHER PERFORMANCE AND LEARNING STUDIO  
AT THE TORONTO HESCHEL SCHOOL / LITERACY IN JUNIOR KINDERGARTEN  
DRAFTING FOR EXCELLENCE IN POETRY AND PROSE / WONDER AS METHOD  
TEACHERS WHO TRUST / THE INFINITE UTILITY OF COMPASSION / HOLISTIC PHYS. ED.

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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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**Functional education raises children to manage real-life challenges in real-life circumstances.**

## How We Do What We Do

**F**unctional fitness is a classification of physical training. WebMD.com says it's "focused on building a body capable of doing real-life activities in real-life positions, not just lifting a certain amount of weight in an idealised posture created by a gym machine." Likewise, functional education focuses on raising children capable of managing real-life challenges in real-life circumstances.

Continuing the gym metaphor, we ask: How can a school prepare children to be fit for the road ahead? What will train students to be morally strong, intellectually nimble, and emotionally balanced? Are they learning how to bear the weight of responsibility and to move as flexibly as required?

The way we do something can mean either our process or our path. For functional education, the "how to do it" question sharpens in focus when we remember Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan's famous maxim, "the medium is the message." In other words, the methods we use to teach our children are, in truth, the content of their instruction.

The onus is on parents and educators to notice which messages are being communicated by the many methods used in children's education. Are the children being tasked to take the initiative or only to react? Are they encouraged to express ideas in their own unique voice or to just "like" the ideas of others? Do they use mathematical thinking or reach automatically for a calculator? At school is it incumbent on

them to discern what's authentic and what may not be? Does the school set a moral compass for ethical decision-making? Do social and emotional skills matter?

How we do what we do warrants our attention. In this issue of THINK, our contributors look at educational methods as a medium, and therefore, a message.

Three writers highlight social emotional methods that are woven into academic pursuits. Dvora Goodman, in the Learning Studio (the new name of her Learning Centre column), reveals trust as the method for peer mentorship among teachers. Michelle Landy-Shavim discovers that a child's natural love for stories becomes a technique to launch literacy in Junior Kindergarten, while in more senior grades, Shimon Newman explains how a teacher's proactive caring support for student effort is the productive way to coach for excellence in drafting poetry and prose.

Three more contributors name unexpected processes and techniques that perform in fascinating ways to enrich learning. In Awe and Wonder, Greg Beiles presents the simple notion of wonder as the root method for scientific inquiry. Orly Borovitch demonstrates music as a captivating instrument to decipher the Torah, and Lisa Sheps reveals the function of a holistic mind-body approach in physical education.

With exciting neurological discovery and intelligent artificiality all around us in 2022, the way we learn seems an increasingly complicated question.

With our families at home, at school, and around our community we can find the messages inherent in our methods and learn who we are and who we want to be.

From her beloved quiet kitchen, Dani Plant shares her wisdom that, while precision, quality products, and concentration are critical in the art of baking, it's the added ingredient of devotion that delivers mastery. Michelle Landy-Shavim describes the parallel learning she instigated at Toronto Heschel; it's a brilliant method for parents to role model both lifelong learning and love of Torah to their children. As she gratefully witnesses the pandemic lockdowns recede, Arielle Berger looks backwards and forwards reflecting on the Jewish response to upheaval.

We can't perform the fundamentals of daily life if we lack functional fitness; athletic trainers and physiotherapists advise keeping our sense of fitness separate from the injury, not letting it define us. This positivity relates directly to the dislocation sustained by our children through the upset of these past few years. Also, physical health trainers also advise that to restore functionality in our bodies, we must relax, release, and then move forward.

When we see schools practising methods that deliver messages of intellectual, moral, social-emotional, and spiritual strength to our children, we can breathe, and, once again, feel the inspirational warmth and energy of all-round good health.

Pam



The Toronto Heschel School  
is delighted to welcome  
**Alan Rusonik**  
as its new Principal.

Alan is a deeply knowledgeable and dedicated Jewish educator with over 20 years of experience in senior leadership positions in Jewish education. He returns to his hometown with a wealth of Jewish knowledge, teaching, and organizational experience.

From Dr. Greg Beiles,  
Head of School,  
and the entire Heschel community,  
"Shalom, Moreh Alan!"

# Introducing The Lola Stein Teacher Performance and Learning Studio

BY GREG BEILES AND PAM MEDJUCK STEIN



The Lola Stein Teacher Performance and Learning Studio emerges this fall 2022 as an exciting initiative where teachers are learners—an accreditation program for teachers in integrated Jewish learning.

## Integrated Jewish Learning: An idea whose time has come

Integrated learning describes a learning theory and process for cross-disciplinary thinking that prepares students to engage with a complex world, bridge the divides between knowledge silos, acquire flexible and critical thinking skills, and prepare themselves as individuals living in community. The approach receives important accolades across the educational world and the time has come to craft a standard for integrated Jewish education.

The Toronto Heschel School (THS) is a renowned pioneer and leader in the field of integrated Jewish learning; it has been developing a multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and experiential approach to Jewish day school education since 1996, and its program was recognized by the prestigious Covenant Award in 2019. The launch of a teacher learning facility at THS will strengthen the school's achievements and augment its progressive direction.

## Accreditation, an Online Curriculum Library, and a Legacy Pathway

Teaching an integrated curriculum requires professional skills beyond the training of most teachers. Experts accept that the shared coherences of multidisciplinary study, the intriguing connections of interdisciplinary study, and the social, emotional, and intellectual wins of experiential education will benefit all children. Yet how to teach for integrated curriculum is not included in bachelor level teacher

programs and appears in graduate programs only as a specialist skill for gifted learner streams.

The Learning Studio will offer this advanced learning to Jewish educators as a North American first. The Learning Studio opens this year to THS teachers, with the intention, in time, to offer its learning to all. The program will mine the school's institutional memory, consult with other leading experts in the field, and learn from its stakeholders.

The impetus is to institutionalize a legacy pathway for the unique program that has matured these past 27 years at THS and that holds tremendous potential to elevate Jewish education. The approach is holistic; its method, mind-set, and culture require the following: (1) a home, which THS has in a large building and five acres of green space; (2) an integrated Jewish curriculum, which THS has and is transforming into online teacher guides; and (3) a cadre of teachers who are skilled in the demands of integrated Jewish education.

As such, the Learning Studio launches with an in-person Teacher Certification Program for Integrated Jewish Learning and an online Toronto Heschel Curriculum Library. The pairing ensures sustained excellence in teaching materials and sustained excellence in accredited teachers. It cements a foundation for the delivery of integrated Jewish learning at The Toronto Heschel School with the intention of sharing its discoveries with the wider Jewish community in years ahead.

## The Footsteps of Rabbi A.J. Heschel

In the accreditation process, teachers will engage with a very modern yet eternal Jewish ethos: walking the talk. In the spirit of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, teachers will learn methods that link their students' Jewish identity as much to lived experience as to Jewish text. Rabbi Heschel's teachings

The launch of a teacher learning facility will strengthen the school's achievements and augment its progressive direction.

and actions merge the spiritual and the human condition. Integrated Jewish learning traces this path, integrating universal values with Jewish practice, ethics, and spirituality. For example, Rabbi Heschel cited Jewish law, *Halacha*, as the reason that he marched for civil rights with Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. at Selma, later saying, "his legs were praying." This activated belief system turns teaching inclusive pluralism into a comprehensive, multi-denominational, Jewish practice, not a laissez-faire social posture.

Given today's dynamic society, individuals who are fluent in multiple disciplines and languages and comfortable moving between them are those who will prosper. Top schools worldwide aspire to this tenor of interdisciplinary study. The Toronto Heschel way adds the integration of Jewish thinking: students view the world through the multivalent prism of Jewish intellectual rigour, and are cognizant they are doing so.

## Advanced Multidisciplinary Skills through Interdisciplinary Techniques

Learning to teach an integrated curriculum requires a solid, thoughtful, and overarching methodology. Teachers will develop expertise in proven academic techniques and pedagogical methods, and refine ways to iterate new interpretations coherent with the THS educational paradigm. The sophisticated methods that THS teachers use now, and in which their mastery will progress, combine academic disciplines, theories of multiple intelligences, learning for understanding, and Jewish knowledge.

In the Learning Studio, THS teachers will advance their skills in preparing graduates to be not only high academic achievers but to be energetic creative thinkers, intellectually and emotionally self-sufficient, literate in Jewish heritage, competent to speak Hebrew, knowledgeably respectful of their planet, and proactively caring of the human situation. They must appreciate ancient wisdom, modern interpretation, and creative invention.

Accreditation through the Learning Studio will require teacher excellence in the following method-based techniques:

1. teaching for excellence in the academic disciplines (literacy, numeracy, science, Chumash studies) using the arts (music, visual arts, drama, sculpture),
2. active learning (second language immersion, *chaverutah*, performance, experimentation),
3. kinesthetic learning (movement, dance, body awareness),
4. interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary integration,
5. mindfulness,
6. and learning outdoors.

Novice teachers will partner with coaches or peer-mentors, teaching and learning simultaneously.

The method through which students activate their learning is what determines effective education. This applies to teachers as learners too. In method teaching, participant-teachers immerse themselves in the thought processes that they aspire for their students to experience. For comparison, in method acting, actors achieve authentic performance by inhabiting a role and communicating the character to the audience. Role-playing student learning reminds teachers how it feels to discover ideas for the first time. Teachers will learn as their students do: "embodying" the methodology.

## Social and Emotional Learning

Given the interplay of intellectual and relational activities in teaching, Learning Studio participants will gain proficiency in social-emotional learning (SEL) and in inspiring the passion that makes academic learning thrive. They will discover SEL opportunities within the academic disciplines, new avenues to generate meaning and relevance for students, and new pathways to teach for understanding Jewishly. The approach is intensive and tasks teachers with galvanizing each student's natural individuality, *b'tzelem elokim*,<sup>1</sup> helping each find their own voice. Classrooms are diversified, providing all children the motivational momentum of intriguing exploration. Training in integrated education accepts that a diversified classroom is both more valuable to all students and more challenging to establish.

## Purpose

The end purpose of education is to empower learners, and in the Learning Studio, the learners are teachers. Participants will discover Judaism as a refined, time-tested way of thinking, an evolving resource for universal values and human creativity: a very sophisticated methodology for educating children. According to Rabbi Heschel, the cry "*na'aseh v'nishma*" means,

In doing we perceive. A Jew is asked to take a leap of action rather than a leap of thought: to surpass his needs, to do more than he understands in order to understand more than he does.<sup>2</sup>

At the Learning Studio, teachers will be asked to take this leap. They will be lovers of Jewish education, proud to learn because they are proud of the Jewish future and confident that Jewish children should learn in this way. The education of children depends on their teachers.

<sup>1</sup> In the image of God.

<sup>2</sup> A.J. Heschel, "Towards an Understanding of Halacha," in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays Edited by Susannah Heschel* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996).

# Method and Wonder

WHERE SCIENCE AND JUDAISM MEET

BY GREG BEILES

A colleague once joked that, in a Jewish day school, there are two subjects that are Holy: Math and Science, and the Holy of Holies is Science. Meanwhile, the juxtaposition of science and religion in Jewish day schools has potential for controversy. To avoid it, a *mechitzah* (a division or separation) is generally placed between them—and never the twain shall meet. Teach one in the morning, the other in the afternoon; assign different teachers, each expert in one field and less so in the other.

Avoiding the complexity of how and where religion and science interact is understandable, but regrettable. Sidestepping presents students with false dichotomies between truth and faith; it oversimplifies science and diminishes the grandeur of Judaism. At The Toronto Heschel School, we explore where science and Judaism coexist and enrich one another.

The first step is to honour both science and Judaism as disciplined ways of encountering the world, not simply as sets of knowledge or sentimentally charged experiences. Core principles of the scientific approach involve asking a question, for which a hypothesis is proposed, then tested. The “scientific method” evolved over the millennia from Ancient Egypt, Greece, Babylonia, and India, through Islamic learning to the European Renaissance and the Modern Age.

*Nullius in verba* translates from the Latin to mean “not on the word.” It’s the motto of the United Kingdom’s academy of natural science, The Royal Society, proclaiming that if you want to know the truth, don’t take anyone’s word for it—test it out for yourself. Sadly, what often passes for science curriculum in schools is the memorization of fact and formula, which is repellent to science itself. Masters of the method, such as Aristotle and Galileo, would shake their heads.

At Heschel, we structure science education through the essential elements of the scientific method. From the earliest age, students learn how to observe real life closely and reach meaningful conclusions through experimentation. We use the world as our laboratory. They are active scientists, not passive recipients of scientific information.

To study ecosystems, students scrutinize organisms living inside one square metre of our school’s yard; to study animal behaviour, they choose a dog, cat, woodpecker, or squirrel that lives in their home, backyard, or local park and

formulate their understanding through patient daily observations. They learn celestial relations of the sun, earth, and moon, by stepping outside their homes at night to chart the movement of the moon; they aggregate their data, and verify or modify their discoveries in light of the evidence. To study the systems of the human body, students run races, recording and testing the correlation between their heartbeat and breathing rates. Students make and test their own hypotheses about the relationship between the circulatory and respiratory systems before studying diagrams and models made by anatomists.

The scientific method answers questions of “how?” It looks to causality: How does vapour rise and form into raindrops? How does light refract through those drops to make a rainbow? Science can explain how the sky can appear blue through refracted light and the physiology of the human eye. It cannot answer, “Why is the sky blue?”

Judaism addresses the “why?” It looks to questions of purpose; questions that are particular to our tradition, such as “Why do we observe the ritual of Passover?” and those that are broader, such as “Why was the world created and what is our place in it?”

Like science, Judaism has a method to answer its questions. According to Rabbi A.J. Heschel, the Jewish way of thinking is rooted in a sense of awe and wonder, “Wonder rather than doubt is the root of all knowledge.”<sup>1</sup> It first seems that Heschel differentiates the Jewish method from the scientific method, which is grounded in “doubt” and skepticism. But no. By emphasizing the value of “wonder,” he signals where Judaism and science interact. Science leads us down the path of discovery; wonder gives us a reason to go there, and stops us in our tracks at important moments along the journey.

A number of years ago, when teaching both science and Torah with my Grade 5 students, I noticed that Moshe’s encounter with the burning bush contained many elements of the scientific method. He notices a bush burning in the desert, stops to carefully observe the strange phenomenon, and wonders, “Why is the bush not burned up?” and then tests his observations by watching closely over a period of time. He makes an analysis and arrives at a conclusion based on what he has seen.

Reprinted from *THINK Issue #23*.

Alongside correlation to the scientific method, two points in the encounter belong to the domain of wonder and religion. The first is when Moshe turns aside from his daily task of shepherding to contemplate this “great sight.” Prior even to analysis and investigation is the moment of awe and wonder that captivates. The Hebrew word *nes*, poorly translated as “miracle,” really means “a sign” of something wondrous. The Jewish concept of a created world is a world full of such “signs.” It awaits human beings, naturally replete with awe and wonder, to contemplate their meaning.

The second “religious” moment comes at the end of the encounter, in the way that Moshe grasps the moral implications of his experience. The understanding comes to him literally as an “epiphany”—the voice of God—that tells Moshe to lead the people of Israel out of servitude. Later interpreters clarify that the fire represents the pain of slavery, and the permanence of the bush reveals the endurance of the people in their spirit of freedom (Midrash Shemot Rabbah 2:5). Moshe begins with awe and wonder, employs the scientific method of observation and analysis, and returns to religion to make a moral decision. I dubbed this productive integration of science and religion Moshe’s Miraculous Method.

Judaism answers its questions by seeking connections between natural, historical, and sociological conditions to generate moral meaning and action. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, author of *The Great Partnership: Science, Religion, and the Search for Meaning*, puts it this way: “Science takes things apart to see how they work; religion puts things together to see what they mean.”<sup>2</sup> Science helps us understand how an astounding variety of species exists on earth; Judaism helps us make the best choices to act responsibly and morally within the complexity of creation. A well-developed capacity for awe and wonder heightens our sensitivity to the relationships and connections required for moral reasoning.

Science—and therefore discovery—benefits when students are nurtured in the practices of awe and wonder; trained to gaze thoughtfully at a starry night and to contemplate what lives in the grasses beneath their feet. Judaism benefits when students understand that critical thinking, asking questions, and experimenting promote moral decision-making and the understanding of human purpose.

Jewish tradition regards Avraham as a great scientist, and it regards monotheism as highly correlated with reason and rationality (Bereshit Rabba 39:1). When Avraham went out to gaze at the stars in the sky, he recognized in this “great sight” a profound responsibility for future generations. We owe our children this same capacity for insight, the one that comes when science and Judaism meet on the horizon.

1 A.J. Heschel, *Who Is Man?* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1965), p. 53.

2 Jonathan Sacks, *The Great Partnership: Science, Religion, and the Search for Meaning* (New York: Schocken Books, 2012), p. 2.

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The scientific method asks how?  
Judaism asks why?





## Make for Yourself a Teacher, Acquire for Yourself a Friend

BY DVORA GOODMAN

The very famous and popular *Pirkei Avot 1:6* recommends, “make for yourself a teacher, acquire for yourself a friend.”<sup>1</sup> To find this advice in a volume of the founding principles of the written laws of Judaism is pretty amazing. It seems we can all use both, and, for those who are teachers, a teacher-mentor rolls two into one.

Morah Maya Lazovski and Morah Lisa Sheps, teachers at The Toronto Heschel School, studied and practised to be teacher-mentors at Brandeis University’s Teacher Leadership Program. The learning that they brought back to the Heschel School is proving to have an important impact. “By promoting observation and conversation about teaching, mentoring can help teachers develop tools for continuous improvement.”<sup>2</sup>

When I interviewed Morah Maya and Morah Lisa (*Morah* being the Hebrew title for a “teacher”), they raved about the Brandeis program and happily recounted how much they learned. Their first step was to contemplate what it means to exert positive influence among one’s peers: to act as colleague and mentor at the same time. Establishing this balanced sense of mission is maybe the hardest part because it requires mutual trust and confidence. The mentee must not sense the subjective judgment of the mentor; both must feel as partners in a joint pursuit to enhance the mentee’s professional growth.

Often interactions between a teacher, a student, and the subject being taught are illustrated using a geometric image known in education as the instructional triangle. When overlaid onto mentoring, the triangle’s three corners designate a mentor and mentee, with the mentee’s personal teaching practice being the content under attention. To strengthen a

mentee’s professional technique, the points of the triangle must coalesce as a whole.

At Brandeis, Morah Lisa and Morah Maya first practised the art of skillful observation, which is the ability to enter another teacher’s classroom with an open mind and free of bias. They learned to survey the room, maintain an open stance, and tune out everything that was going on in the class that was not relevant to the intended focus. Before the scheduled observation, they were advised to sit with their mentees and review together what skills the mentee was aspiring to improve and what the specific focus of the observation would be. For example, a teacher might choose to focus on how she gives instructions to the class or how he responds to students’ questions. Assurance that the analysis and feedback will cover one topic only helps the mentee feel more comfortable during the observation.

Morah Maya teaches Hebrew as a second language in Senior Kindergarten using Toronto Heschel’s immersive bilingual approach. To assist new teachers in similar roles, she begins by remembering how when she began teaching at Heschel years back, it had not been easy to acclimatize. Before she even begins to observe or coach, she volunteers to let her new mentee watch her. The novice teacher-mentee will observe Morah Maya over a period of time and they will speak together. This phase brings two blessings: first, the new teachers begin to absorb how the master teacher speaks Hebrew to young students in a particularly consistent manner, and, second, it reminds Morah Maya how it feels to be observed. With this experience refreshed in her mind, she initiates the new mentorship with the combined integrity of a learner and a teacher at the same time.

Once she establishes strong trust with a mentee, she will observe the mentee at work and begin to address nuances in the teaching practice. For example, she once observed that a mentee was consistently using phrases in the negative form when speaking with the children. Morah Maya helped the mentee appreciate what was happening and why it was significant to shift to a more positive form. Staying true to the non-judgmental format, she recorded everything the mentee said and later read the “script” aloud to identify the negativity. The mentee began to appreciate how her natural way of speaking inclined towards the negative and how alternative expressions were available. The two delved into ways the mentee might train herself to rephrase in the positive. Then Morah Maya returned to observe again and the process continued.

Over the past few years Morah Lisa’s mentorship work has extended to teaching her colleagues to be peer mentors. Given how hard it is for a teacher-mentor to walk into a classroom and withhold subjective opinion, teacher-mentors-in-training have to learn to adopt a specific framework for accurate observation. Morah Lisa’s cohort are learning experientially to be mentors by alternatively being the observer and the observed.

At Brandeis, Morah Maya and Morah Lisa also examined organizational structures that have leverage in daily school life; how classrooms are managed and how they operate, the ways that teachers learn, how they interact as a community of peers. Aiming to refine the teaching culture in general and mentor their peers towards master-teacher levels, Morah Lisa and Morah Maya envision future teaching at Heschel as an open practice with teachers coming and going from each other’s classrooms, each benefiting from peer observations and mentoring. “The hope is that experienced teachers will

serve as mentors and models, helping novices learn new pedagogies and socializing them to new professional norms.”<sup>3</sup> Morah Lisa and Morah Maya admit that their aspiration for a pervasive school-wide commitment to peer mentorship among their colleagues is a high minded and daunting goal. Nonetheless the success of their present small-scale implementation of the Brandeis mentorship framework is giving them real confidence that their sails are set in the right direction. They understand the rise of a mentoring culture as an incremental process: as the number of teachers involved in peer mentorship at Heschel increases, its direct benefit to students will materialize, and more peers will join.

Both Morah Maya and Morah Lisa acknowledge that mentoring teachers is not an easy pursuit to undertake. They also admit that its study and practice feed their own professional growth. They recalled for our conversation the video of a dancer that they watched at Brandeis. The camera opens on a single performer moving slowly by herself. Then another joins, and another, until the entire screen is filled with movement as they dance together and something beautiful comes alive. I hear these women saying that this collective generative beauty can happen in a school—especially when educators find a teacher who is also a friend.

<sup>1</sup> The title *Pirkei Avot* translates as “Chapters of Our Work, of Our Fathers, or of Our Categories.”

<sup>2</sup> Sharon Feiman-Nemser, “Teacher Mentoring: A Critical Review,” *ERIC Digest*, Vol. 95, No. 2 (July 1996), p. 4, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED397060>.

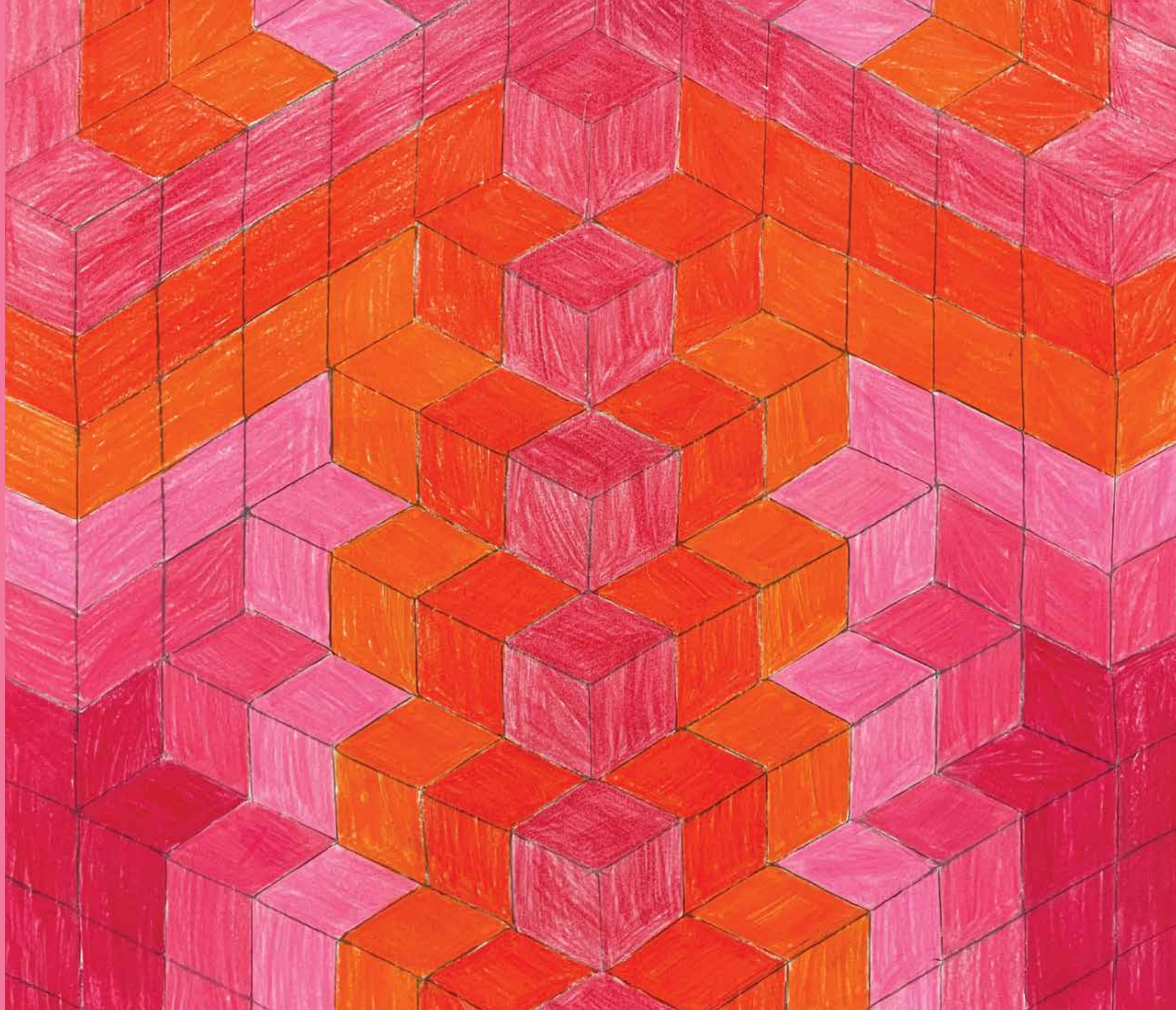
<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

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**“By promoting observation and conversation about teaching, mentoring can help teachers develop tools for continuous improvement.”**

# HOW METHOD MATTERS





## Literacy in Junior Kindergarten

AN INTERVIEW WITH  
MORAH RENA COHEN

BY MICHELLE LANDY-SHAVIM

**A** literacy curriculum is not always obvious at a grade level where most students do not yet consistently know their letters. At a parent education event, Moreh<sup>1</sup> Greg Beiles, Head of School, propelled his discussion of four-year-olds “through their journey of literacy at Heschel.” With gentle respect for the unique developmental path that each child travels, he explained that the first objective is for the children to generate their identity as readers and writers as soon as possible. At Heschel they do it through storytelling, speech-making, plays, and performances. This sense of self as a thinker and communicator is core to Junior Kindergarten (JK) literacy.

Moreh Greg described how, when children enjoy being storytellers, in time they can “become poets who playfully dance with language.” They advance through elementary and junior high school to “ponder the roots and origins of words—such as the connection between civics, civilization, civility, citizen,” and they will then “spell with understanding.” They will become “researchers, documenters, and writers of reports, essays, and projects” and graduate from Grade 8 as “truly literate people, who think critically and make meaning out of what they read, and who, through their writing, presentations, and speeches, see themselves as creative contributors to a literate culture befitting a People of the Book.” Yes, this is still the story of literacy in JK.

Morah<sup>2</sup> Rena Cohen has been teaching in the Early Years Program at The Toronto Heschel School for 15 years, almost exclusively in Junior Kindergarten, the youngest cohort. She is a staunch advocate for early years’ literacy. Morah Rena

answered questions about building literacy and literary confidence in young children from their entrance into JK until they leave her class and rise up to Senior Kindergarten.

### How do you start the process of children learning to read and write?

Morah Rena: We construct a story. It’s not about reading or writing a book. “Storybuilding” is a series of actions that the children perform as a group and that prompt them along narrative threads from beginning to end.

I place objects and picture cards on the carpet in front of the children and we start a little chant, “Once upon a, once upon a, once upon a time...” Then I add something, maybe a frog: “Once upon a time a frog started to go for a jump.” I ask one of the students—because I want them to contribute to the story—what happened next and together we build a story using icons, figures, songs, and movement. The children go home with copies of these images and symbols eager to demonstrate, or narrate, their story to their family.

### Why is storytelling key to early literacy? Are you talking about motivation and opportunity?

Morah Rena: Yes, I am. Storytelling promotes literacy because it ensures that the kids are enjoying and embracing the learning. Then, once they are involved in the plots and pictures and wrapped in their imaginations, we talk about words, emphasize first sounds, use our ears to recognize sounds, and get playful with rhyming activities.

### Which is your personal favourite of the JK literacy projects? Why?

Morah Rena: I like them all, but I find Purim the most exciting. The children learn to name feelings and to differentiate emotions from actions, which are both important social emotional skills that we practise in JK. We tell the Purim story as if we are the Purim characters. Speaking about Esther, or Hadassah,<sup>3</sup> going to the palace for the first time, we ask the children: “When were you in a new situation? How did you feel? How do you think Esther was feeling as she arrived at the palace? Was she excited to be chosen queen? Was she nervous to live in a new place?” We are asking the children to internalize the narrative events by connecting the emotional expressions contained in them to their lived experiences. We are, of course, telling the story in Hebrew and English and our students are learning to relay their feelings in both languages.

### How does literacy factor into the students’ personal growth?

Morah Rena: Our children are sponges. We are giving them the skills to dive in and love learning. Enthusiasm and momentum allow them to assume future tasks that otherwise might feel overwhelming. We constantly tell them, “You are a reader and you are a writer.” Even a simple mark on a page is the first sign of a story for these students. Then they believe, “If I can be a reader and a writer, I can be anything.”

### How does the wide spectrum of childhood development that shows up in JK affect the classroom? Has the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this?

Morah Rena: The pandemic has greatly affected the classroom. While at home, many children became the centre of their world around them seeing themselves as the most important person. The classroom requires them to coexist with other children and accept that they will not always have their way. We help our students learn to understand they will not always be first in the line or first with the blocks. We foster their flexibility by allowing them choices and a sense of ownership of their learning. We say, “You can choose to do a task now or later, but you do need to complete it.” This fundamental social emotional learning develops the interpersonal skills that are essential to a successful, cohesive community. Knowing how to thrive in a community is critical to all that our students will do in the future. They are building their own story.

<sup>1</sup> Moreh is Hebrew for teacher.

<sup>2</sup> Morah is Hebrew for teacher.

<sup>3</sup> Esther was born with the name Hadassah (“Myrtle”). Her name was changed to Esther to hide her identity upon becoming queen of Persia.

**Michelle Landy-Shavim** is a Heschel parent of three students. She is a lawyer specialist in Consumer Protection and fascinated by all things bureaucratic in the educational sector.





# Relationship, Expectation, and Consultation

LEARNING TO DRAFT FOR EXCELLENCE  
IN WRITING POETRY AND PROSE

BY SHIMON NEWMAN

As teachers, how do we unravel the challenge of teaching writing to our students? How do we tap into our students' potential, unlock their creativity and imagination? Many factors can maximize the possible. Three of these factors are caring teacher–student relationships, high expectations, and descriptive feedback, the latter being a certain type of interactive and formative evaluation that focuses on the process of learning and development of skills for success rather than a specific end product.

My first maxim is to always remember that I am teaching children and the subject is a conduit for learning. In his 1953 speech, “The Spirit of Jewish Education,” Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said,

The teacher is not an automatic fountain from which intellectual beverages may be obtained. The teacher is either a witness or a stranger. To guide a pupil into the Promised Land, the teacher must have been there before. When asking: Do I stand for what I teach? Do I believe what I say? The teacher must be able to answer in the affirmative.

What we need more than anything else is not textbooks but text-people. It is the personality of the teacher which is the text that the pupils read; the text that they will never forget.<sup>1</sup>

The renowned professor and advocate for evidence-based learning, Dr. John Hattie, found that the greatest impact on student achievement is collective efficacy. Collective efficacy means “a staffs’ shared belief that through their collective action, they can positively influence student outcomes.” Hattie’s research, along with that of Christine Rubie-Davies, demonstrates that teachers’ who have high expectations and confidence in their students’ capacity to achieve, and successfully communicate those expectations, have a substantial impact on students’ learning and progress. Students internalize the beliefs, embrace failure as part of learning, and become more intrinsically motivated.

In the process called descriptive feedback, teachers consult with their students and garner insight for improving the student’s learning as well as their own techniques for instruction. The process means that before students are summatively assessed, they have had opportunities to receive advice to refine their skills. This is especially critical in teaching writing. During the writing process, I provide clear and specific written and oral feedback and review it with students to ensure they understand how to improve.

Writing well is arguably the most challenging aptitude for students to develop. It demands strong reading comprehension and grammar skills, familiarity with the conventions of

written expression, such as sentences and paragraphs, and a good grasp of the stages of writing from planning to final form. Writing demands students learn to organize their thoughts coherently. It teaches them to self-regulate and to persevere through the many steps in the writing process.

In my view, written instructions, rubrics, criteria for success, and student examples are useful only in a responsive and caring feedback process. I ask my students to read me their rough drafts and explain stanza by stanza the theme or message they mean to convey. I ask them to point out which lines lack poetic or descriptive language and don’t work as well as they’d like. Often, they identify the trouble and insist they just can’t think of anything else. Discussing my thoughts aloud, I model or co-write new lines with them and prompt the student to choose their own words. It is amazing what a few cues can do! When I challenge my students to dig a little deeper, think a touch longer, and work a bit harder, the accomplishments are intense and wholehearted.

A good writer enhances their writing with vivid imagery; authors and poets paint profound and stunning pictures with words. To teach this art form, I lead students through guided visualizations; closing their eyes, relaxing and imagining a scenario that I slowly describe. For example:

Imagine you drive to the beach and lie down on a beach chair. Close your eyes and pay attention to all of the details. You begin to soak in the rays and feel the warmth of the sun coursing through your veins as your body slowly relaxes. You feel the tension lifting as you slowly breathe in and out, in and out...relaxing all of your muscles. A gentle breeze wisps through your hair and softly blows a special sense of calm. The wind carries a taste of salt which you can taste as you lick your lips. You listen intently as the waves slowly come to the shore, the lapping of the waves lulling you into a state of total relaxation. Your body feels as if you’re floating, rocking back and forth ever so slowly. Breathe in and out, in and out.

I ask students to describe how they feel, what they notice, and what techniques or words rendered the images real. They identify adjectives and words that stimulate the five senses. We learn that while we may notice how emotions trigger a physiological response, it takes time to understand that the names we give to emotions are “just labels” and it is our biological response that we should pay attention to

in order to recognize our emotions. Practising visualization helps students to be aware of their physical responses, such as their heart rates and breathing; it assists them literally and figuratively to get in touch with their emotions. I push them to go below the surface of their feelings and immerse themselves in the emotional experience.

This is an excerpt from a Grade 5 student’s emotion poem:

When you are frustrated, you’re the ocean  
Throwing punches at the rock shores  
Sculpting all the jagged islands  
When you are frustrated, you’re the ocean  
Battering the sides of ships  
Sinking them to the depths of the ocean floor

Interestingly, this particular student did not perform well during the first-draft assignment. Responding to the preliminary version, I explained what was lacking, ensuring the criteria for success were understood, and sharing my higher expectation of their capability. The student needed only the right conditions and motivation to return with the above display of obvious talent. My students are learning myriad techniques to elevate their writing; they also walk away with invaluable interpersonal skills and life lessons.

The following was written by a Grade 5 student who required a little extra motivation to bring out incredible talent. The theme of slavery motivated these layered insights into how a slave might think.

The new plantation is greener and grand  
But darker and more sinister  
Trees are all around growing high  
The roots firmly in the ground  
The trees growing higher and higher  
Closer to heaven  
Where their limbs are free  
Branches no longer whips

Powerful poetry indeed!

<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, “The Spirit of Jewish Education,” *Journal of Jewish Education*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (1953), n.p. The article is based on an address delivered at the Pedagogic Conference of the Jewish Education Committee of New York City on February 15, 1953.

Shimon Newman teaches Grade 5 at The Toronto Heschel School.

Imagine you drive to the beach and lie down on a beach chair.  
Close your eyes and pay attention to all of the details.

Chanting Torah integrates how to read an ancient scroll with how to understand its text. Beginning in Grade 3, students explore tune, grammar, and meaning from parchment markings.

## Ta'amei HaMikrah

FLAVOUR IS FUNCTION IN TORAH STUDY

BY ORLY BOROVITCH



In Grade 3, Toronto Heschel students are introduced to the musical notation system for chanting Torah. In line with the school's pedagogical style and philosophy, studying how to chant Torah integrates the function of reading Torah with how to understand and interpret the text. Beginning in Grade 3, we teach the children the tunes and symbols that bring the Torah to life and into our ears.

The symbols are called *trop* in Yiddish and *Ta'amei HaMikrah* in Hebrew. These are the cantillation symbols that tell the Torah reader when to pause and where to stop when reciting or singing a Torah portion. Each symbol has a different set of associated notes. When strung together, the notes become the particular chant for a given section of the Torah.

*Ta'amei HaMikrah* translates as “the flavour of the reading,” and the *trop* employs rhythm, intonation, and emphasis to annotate a document that was scribed as a parchment scroll in ancient times without any inherent written punctuation.

In written English and other languages, the comma, period, or exclamation mark organize words and paragraphs and serve to assist readers with the intended meaning of a written passage. *Trop* guides us to know how our early ancestors thought the Torah should be punctuated and, therefore, understood.

The practice was developed by a sect of Judaism known as the Masoretes, who lived between the 6th and 10th centuries CE in Tiberias, Israel. The Talmud, the central document of Rabbinic Judaism, and the Mishna, which is the codification of Oral Law, seem to have been chanted to *trop* in the past.

We know from a comment in the Talmud that Torah melodies began as an oral tradition. Each of the 27 *trop* (cantillations) could be conducted with hand signals (Berachot 62a) and were ultimately encoded in a series of written symbols. For example, the *Ta'am* called an *etnachta* can be found at the conclusion of the first segment of a Torah verse and looks like a wishbone. It consists of two short sounds that are deeper notes and ends with one longer sound on a higher note. The result is similar to a pause within a larger conversation but lacks the finality of the *sof pasuk*, or final sound of the verse.

The markings have been used consistently throughout almost all biblical works with the exception of the Psalms, Proverbs, and most of the Book of Job, which have their own particular system (known as *Ta'amei Emet*). The sound of the notes that go with the *trop* may vary in sound as between the different works of ancient text but the notes always look the same and always provide the reader with the same instructions for where to pause and when to stop. For example, the *trop* in Megillat Esther, the story of the Jewish holiday of Purim, creates quite a different melody to the *trop* used for the Haftarah, which are readings generally taken from the prophetic writings. *Trop* can also be used to call attention

to an event; one pair of *trop*, *kadmah v'azlah*, call for a sound like a trumpet that is demanding everyone's attention.

Students are introduced to the most commonly found symbols and learn how to identify them in the Chumash, the Five Books of Moses, and how to sing them using their voices and the original hand gestures, the *tenuot*. For instance, students represent the symbol “*mapach*” with open arms that gradually slide together thereby using their entire bodies to represent the sounds and shape of the symbol at the same time. Gestures are a pedagogical tool commonly used at Heschel to teach Judaics and Hebrew as a second language and they make perfect sense as a method to help students internalize both the graphomotor symbol and the sound.

While the rabbis developed *Ta'amei HaMikrah* to add flavour—or character—to the Torah reading experience, the symbols also helped readers to make meaning of the verses. We teach our students to identify the several prominent signs that are used to punctuate Torah when it is read aloud. In this way, *trop* becomes another series of context clues as the students discover deeper meaning in ancient text. Of the 27 different *trop* symbols, 14 bring a phrase to an end, while the rest are used to continue a phrase. Students learn how to break down the Torah verses into logical and more palatable parts and decipher what is written. They find, for example, the word “*nach*,” which is Hebrew for “rest,” inside the word “*etnachta*” and learn that the *etnachta* or *zakef katon* or *sof pasuk* symbols call for a pause or rest.

By Grade 4, students connect symbol, sound, and word, internalizing patterns that recur within the text and understanding when to emphasize, connect, pause, or conclude. They are associating meaning with an auditory system that was established countless generations ago and they work together in *chaverutot* (small learning groups) to decode and analyze the text before them.

Students enjoy the complex demands of learning *trop* and demonstrate a strong sense of pride as they gradually master the challenge of singing a given verse according to all its cantillation symbols. The notes also allow students to practise and polish their cantillation skills, singing, trilling, and chanting on pitch, which in and of itself offers them an opportunity to interpret and imbue their own “flavour” into their Torah study. In Junior High the students chant Torah for the elementary and junior high communal prayers, *Tefillah B'tzibur*, on Mondays and Thursdays, respectively. Hopefully, these skills and personal sensibilities for reading Torah will continue with our students wherever their lives take them.

Orly Borovitch teaches Hebrew and Jewish Studies at The Toronto Heschel School.

# How to Save Your Life in Eight Years

PHYSICAL EDUCATION  
AT TORONTO HESCHEL

BY LISA SHEPS

As they progress through Phys. Ed.,  
the body-mind connection  
becomes the centre of attention.



The integration of mind and body reveals itself as Grade 8 students name bones and muscles while their gym teacher, Moreh David Roumy, points to different parts of a desk-size skeleton. The students describe the agonist and the antagonist: the muscle doing the work and the muscle not working. When the elbow flexes, the agonist bicep shortens and the antagonist tricep lengthens. As the elbow extends, it's the reverse, much like Newton's second law, for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. What's developing here is an authentic appreciation for physical complexities that lie literally just beneath the skin.

Moreh David began his career as an athletic therapist, studying anatomy, physiology, and how the body functions holistically. His work was to rehabilitate clients to a healthy autonomous state, helping them return to a normal routine after an injury, their muscles retrained to function optimally after trauma or atrophy. The work also included developing coordination skills in children with low-motor functioning. Moreh David now brings this expertise to The Toronto Heschel School where he teaches physical education in Grades 3 to 8. In conversation, he explains to me that his primary goal is to prepare students for a healthy active life and describes how he achieves this.

Gym class begins with three minutes of mindful meditation. Students sit in a circle, gradually feeling grounded and regulated. Breath, body, and mind absorb the quiet before the launch into rigorous activity. After the still moment, there's a warm-up: skips, gallops, lunges, jogs. It limbers up students' muscles, readying them for physical learning.

Each unit of study sees students master a new technique; it may be accurately shooting a basketball, swinging a bat, running longer distances, or relaying a baton while sprinting. Each task requires specific muscular functions that students identify and attune to as they coordinate body and mind. Indeed, as they progress through Phys. Ed. with Moreh David, the body-mind connection becomes the centre of attention.

One Grade 6 example is a unit where students are working to run increasingly longer distances and use focused meditation to do so. First, they run while reciting a line from the *Ashrei*, the daily prayer composed of Psalms about happiness in being close to God, among other things. They are running while meditating on their unspoken personal relationship to God:

קרוב ה' לְכֹל קוֹרְאֵיוֹ, לְכֹל אֲשֶׁר יִקְרָאֵהוּ בְּאֵמֶת

God is close to all who call upon God, to all who call to God with sincerity.

Steadily, they elongate the distances they run and they do it while visualizing text from the *Shema* prayer:

בְּכָל-לֵבְבְךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל-מְאֹדְךָ

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

Again, as they jog, they reflect on their private interior voice that connects them to God. Their rhythm mimics each verse, reaching towards a crescendo and quickening their pace. Working together, body and mind propel the students forward, one lap at a time. Running becomes a rumination in which students reach a state of flow.

The content of Moreh David's Grade 8 gym curriculum is how the physical wonders of our bodies interrelate to maximize holistic functionality. It is a deeply Jewish endeavour to become fluent and proficient in how the body works. We express gratitude daily for our "embodied miracles" reciting the *Asher Yatzar bracha* (blessing): "אֲשֶׁר יָצַר." (See the full blessing below.) This method immerses students in an analytical and fundamental understanding of who they are. Students recite:

אֲשֶׁר יָצַר אֶת הָאָדָם בְּחֵכְמָהּ, וּבְרָא בּוֹ נִקְבִּים וְנִקְבִּים, חֲלוּלִים חֲלוּלִים

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, who forms the human body with wisdom and creates within it a miraculous combination of organs and arteries, tissues and sinews....

The blessing acknowledges the myriad intricacies comprising our bodies, but the word "wisdom" really stands out. While the human body is indeed miraculous, Moreh David's students embrace the herculean task of understanding how and why this is so. His program of physical literacy culminates with these Grade 8 students who are soon to graduate, and it's time for them to implement their accumulated learning from years past. They return to study the musculoskeletal system in what is amazingly in-depth detail for Grade 8 students, and concurrently they practise an array of strength-training exercises, targeting and observing the functioning of specifically identified muscle groups. It's an emphatically multidimensional, multilayered, and active

Blessed are You, Adonai our God,  
Who forms the human body with wisdom  
And creates within it a miraculous combination  
Of organs and arteries, tissues and sinews.  
It is known before Your throne of glory  
That if one of these were to be open where it should be closed  
Or closed where it should be open  
We would not be able to stand before you and offer praises.  
Blessed are You, Adonai, creator of embodied miracles!

Junior High experience of the miraculous engineering that intertwines throughout the human body.

During their years of discovery at Toronto Heschel, the students have studied muscles that flex and extend, cooperate in counterbalance, and fit in a dynamic whole. These are apt metaphors for graduating Heschelians, the kind that encourage continual reinterpretation as students' experiences evolve. Balance, collaboration, compromise, and wholeheartedness are the very habits of heart, mind, body, and soul that they have been considering, cultivating, and honing at Heschel since Junior Kindergarten. As teens, they see them embodied.

To implement their learning, Moreh David asks his Grade 8 class to design exercise programs for fictional clients such as young athletes or seniors rehabilitating from injury and people with diabetes managing body mass. The students conduct a needs assessment and align exercises to each client's physical conditioning. As they design their recommendations, empathy enters. Puzzling over bodies that function differently than their own, they approach the assignment with *kavod* (respect) and rise to the soulful challenge, just as they would in their studies of history, Jewish text, civics, or visual art.

Morah David astutely builds invaluable life skills in his students. By Grade 8, they have an ingrained knowledge base for how their very own bodies work. He trains them to assume agency over their physical selves and connect their bodies and minds together as one. The aptitude empowers his students to lead vibrant and vigorous lives and to respect the lives of others.

It might be said that the method emerges from the ethic for *pikuach nefesh*—the principle that, in Judaism, saving human life is the most holy of pursuits. With this kind of training, the students are, in many ways, saving their own.

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.

ברוך אתה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,  
אֲשֶׁר יָצַר אֶת הָאָדָם בְּחֵכְמָהּ,  
וּבְרָא בּוֹ נִקְבִּים וְנִקְבִּים, חֲלוּלִים חֲלוּלִים,  
גְּלוֹי וְדוּעַ לִפְנֵי כְסֵא כְבוֹדְךָ  
שָׂאם וּפְתַח אֶחָד מֵהֶם,  
אוּ שְׂתָם אֶחָד מֵהֶם,  
אֵי אֶפְשֶׁר לְהִתְקַיֵּם וְלַעֲמוֹד לִפְנֶיךָ:  
ברוך אתה ה', רֹפֵא כָּל בָּשָׂר, וּמַפְלִיא לַעֲשׂוֹת

# WHERE METHOD MATTERS



# Good Books

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHILDREN AND THE PEOPLE WHO LOVE THEM

BY GAIL BAKER & TZIPORAH COHEN

AGES  
4-8

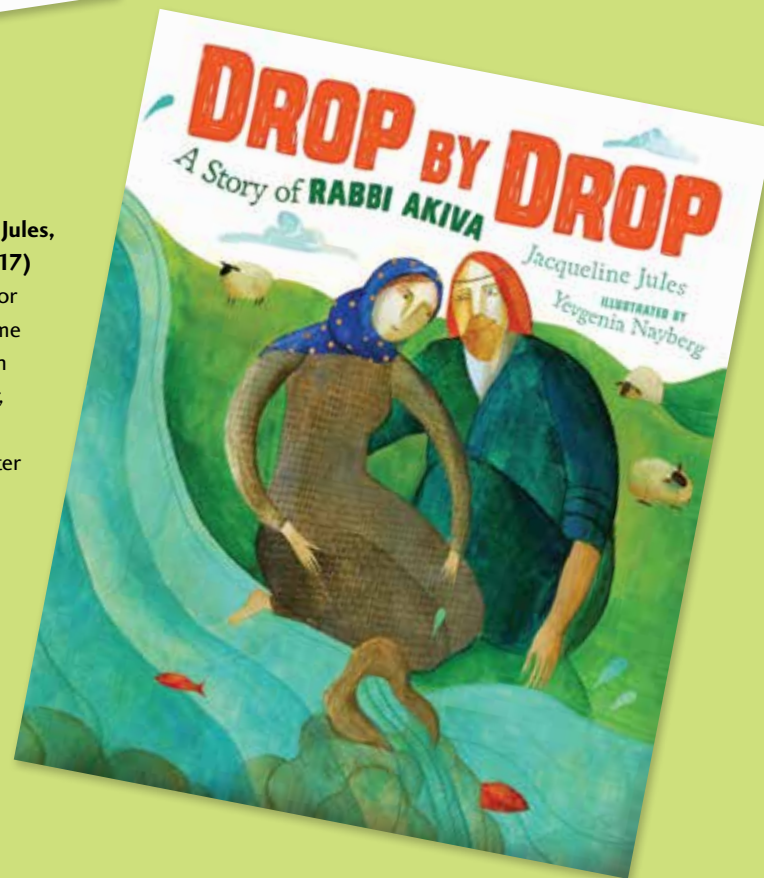


*The Most Magnificent Thing* written and illustrated by Ashley Spires (Kids Can Press, 2014)

With her trusted dog assistant by her side, an imaginative little girl decides to make the Most Magnificent Thing. She fills her wagon with found junk, plans her design, and gets to building. Evocative vocabulary, such as “tinkers,” “stares,” and “tweaks,” describes her ambitious creativity. Her emotions are displayed in vivid illustrations against a black-and-white urban setting as varying fonts enliven the story. When, after several tries, her vision fails to materialize, a major temper tantrum ensues. Her dog suggests a walk and, calmed by the stroll, the girl returns and now notices how her failed attempts consolidate in a surprising, and truly magnificent, result.

*Drop By Drop: A Story of Rabbi Akiva* written by Jacqueline Jules, illustrated by Yevgenia Nayberg (Kar-Ben Publishing, 2017)

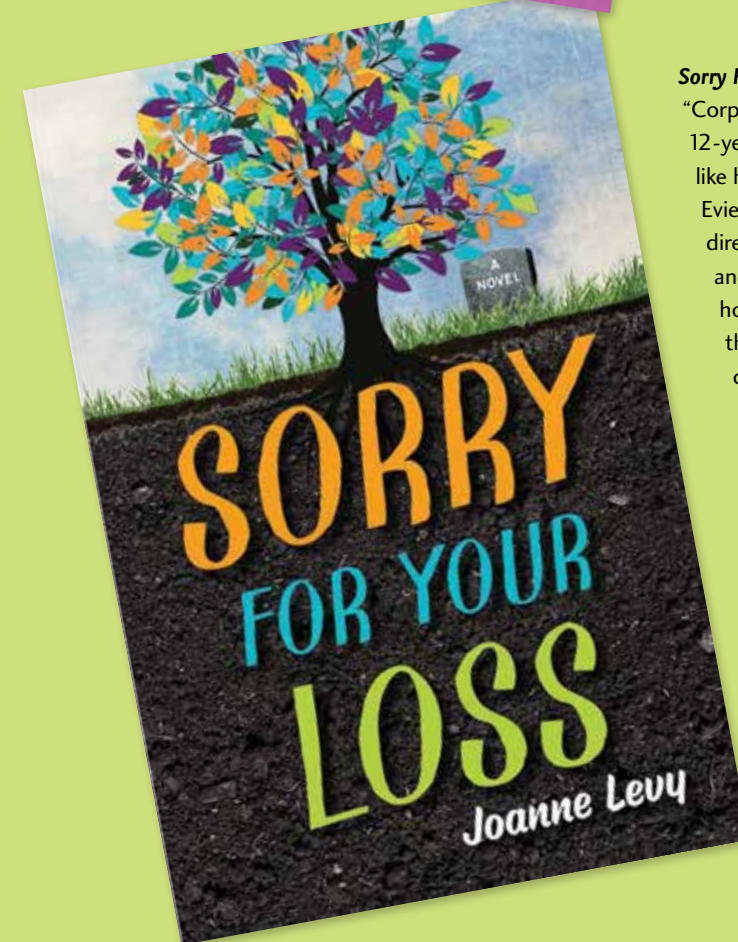
How does a poor boy who grows up never learning to read or write, working as a shepherd for a wealthy landowner, become Rabbi Akiva, the revered rabbi and leading Jewish scholar? In this tale of the legendary teacher, the landowner’s daughter, Rachel, falls in love with Akiva, marries him, and encourages him to begin learning at the age of 40. Little by little, as water cuts “drop by drop” through stone, Akiva learns to read—letter by letter and word by word. He travels far away and studies for many years, becoming the learned scholar we study today. When he returns, he gives Rachel the credit she is due. With bold, colourful illustrations, this story tells of the persistence needed to learn and reminds us that the people who guide and support those who become great are heroes—and heroines—too.



*Air: A Novel* by Monica Roe (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2022)  
Spunky Emmie, a 12-year-old WCMX\* athlete and middle-schooler, faces a lot of challenges, but using a wheelchair is not one of them. What is a challenge is attending a poorly accessible school and selling enough handcrafted wheelchair bags to earn the money for a proper specialized athletic wheelchair so she can do the jumps and spins she craves. When a faulty ramp at school causes her wheels to tip over, the school jumps on the “Save Emmie” bandwagon, holding a fundraiser to raise money for her dream wheelchair. With the thoughtful coaching of “AK\_SalmonGranny,” a wheelchair-using Alaskan grandma whom she meets through her Etsy-like website page, Emmie helps her well-meaning, but misguided, community see where they went wrong as she works to get her real needs met.

\*A sport in which wheelchair athletes perform tricks adapted from skateboarding and bicycle motocross, usually performed at a skatepark.

AGES  
10-14



*Sorry For Your Loss* by Joanne Levy (Orca Book Publishers, 2021)

“Corpse Girl!” Despite the deeply humiliating name-calling by class bullies, 12-year-old Evie persists towards her dream of becoming a funeral director like her parents, the owners of the local Jewish funeral home. Though Evie knows that she has a lot to learn, she sees herself as a junior funeral director, carefully observing her parents, trying to emulate their behaviours and attitudes. Then she meets Oren, a boy her age who has survived a horrific car accident that killed his parents. Evie quickly learns that being there for somebody can also involve sitting and being quiet, not a small challenge for a naturally chatty person. Sensitively written and filled with humour despite the subject matter, in this heartwarming novel, we see Evie learn from her parents and from Oren himself how to connect with and bring some comfort to a grieving friend.

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.

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.

## Learning with Our Children

BY MICHELLE LANDY-SHAVIM

I did not know I was missing out until I had no choice but to face it. The Torah, specifically the Shulchan Aruch, requires that we honour parents and teachers with the same type of honour (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 242:1). By extension, a person who is both a parent and a teacher of Torah experiences both unique relationships, but in a strengthened way. Perhaps those who do not learn Torah with their children are missing out on a crucial part of the parent-child relationship. I was.

It was early in the pandemic, 2020, when I realized we were alone. Just my spouse, our children, and me. Shabbat during a cold spring was long and lonely. The village I had relied on had suddenly dispersed and I had to come to terms with the solitude my family was facing. The holidays had felt so empty without our guests and regular synagogue attendance.

By Shavuot, it was fairly clear the pandemic was not going anywhere and if I wanted my children to connect to the texts of the holiday, I had to personally step up. And, truthfully, I needed it for myself as well.

I started to read my children the story of Ruth aloud. A little bit of Hebrew, some English. Luckily, Ruth is a fairly straightforward text. We discussed what we thought it might feel like to be in a strange country and unable to afford food.

We started to read the *parsha* of the week together as the summer went along, and by Rosh Hashanah, we read about the binding of Isaac, the *Akeidat Yitzchak*. On Yom Kippur, I clearly remember reading the story of Yonah with my children giggling at the idea of Yonah running away from Hashem (the most frustrating hide-and-seek playmate they could imagine...). I soon learned that I did not need to be a professional educator to engage my children in Jewish texts. I just needed to show some interest.

Meanwhile, other Toronto Heschel parents I spoke with were also itching to connect with their children on the Jewish plane. At a meeting, I was blown away by parents' desire to learn Torah with their children. Parents who had a Jewish education, parents who were Jewish by choice, parents who had no Jewish education whatsoever—they were all yearning to speak knowledgeably with their children about Torah.

We set about figuring out how to connect with our children's Chumash curriculum and, in turn, with our children and ourselves. As parents of Grade 5 students, we read together the beginning of the *Sefer Shemot* (Book of Exodus) and talked about concepts of freedom within the text. In the group with children in Grade 3, we read about Avraham and Lot and making decisions, *l'shem Shalom*, in the name of peace. In each conversation, we connected with each other and with the texts.

By now we were back in school, and so for each conversation, we would send home with the kids a bag of treats and tea for the parents along with a source sheet. The curiosity of the children was palpable: "Why is this going home?" "Why are my parents getting snacks?" "What are they learning?" The kids were wide-eyed at the idea of their parents learning part of their curriculum.

I realized that this group learning provided a specific visual demonstration to the children of parents learning. While many of us may be required to learn new things for our jobs or choose to do so for our hobbies, our children are often oblivious to this learning, not seeing our struggle to gain new skills as they are required to do on a regular basis. Role modelling our struggle with complex language and unfamiliar ideas provides children a framework for their own academic efforts, for learning without the reward of a grade or positive feedback from their teachers.

By June 2022, we were also sharing coffee and d'verei Torah of the children's weekly *middot* (thoughts about topics in the weekly Torah portion), with each week introducing us to the concepts our children were learning and bringing us closer to words of Torah.

Learning Torah ourselves produces more meaningful Torah learning in our children. By demonstrating to our children that we also hunger for words of Torah, we model for them the search for illumination and meaning in our ancient texts. We show them that we too are studying and striving to become better parents and community members through a bond that draws on the sweetness of the Torah.

We sent the children home with snacks and a source sheet for their parents....  
Their curiosity was palpable.

# Method in the Kitchen

BY DANI PLANT



It is deep into the night. Our house is quiet, but my mind is not. I rise quietly and seek solace in my sanctuary: my kitchen. My world of routines and predictability still feels upended and on its head, this spring of 2022, but as I take out my measuring cups and spoons, flow soft music through my earbuds, and start to bake, my dance begins and my mind begins to settle.

For me, the art of baking is meditative and methodical with a dash of the miraculous thrown in. Its predictability comes via a recipe, a manual with step-by-step instructions to create something whole and beautiful from various ingredients that, on their own, are much less than when they are brought together.

In a recipe, each ingredient contributes to a better final product when measured accurately with focus and care. Additionally, I am well aware that all ingredients are not created equal. If budget and availability permit, I will always choose ingredients

closest to their purest form, meaning no additives and minimal processing. Take vanilla extract as an example; the product label for pure vanilla extract should list only two ingredients: vanilla beans and 35% alcohol. In contrast, labels on artificial vanilla extract will reveal all sorts of chemicals that have been combined in a lab to mimic the taste of vanilla. While artificial costs less, much more is needed for the desired flavour. With pure vanilla, optimum taste comes with minimum interference, and, in addition, enhances the product with subtleties of flavour that can never come from a lab. It's a perfect illustration of how, as with many things in the culinary world and elsewhere, less is often more and attention to quality does double duty.

Methodically following instructions is integral to predictability, especially in baking. General cooking can allow a little creative independence—another carrot or a non-traditional mushroom thrown in a holiday brisket will not affect how the dish turns out—but a little extra butter or flour in your chocolate chip cookie will yield a cookie that even the Cookie Monster will skip. When baking, precision with every step and attention to every detail—almost to the point of being in a meditative state as you work—will ensure perfect chemistry and glorious results.



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To me, there is a reason why language used for baking and words that describe relationships are often similar. Both start with components that “go well together,” whether it’s two people or a list of ingredients, and both require the right amount of attention and effort to ensure the constituent parts mix in the right way and bring about interactions necessary for the desired product, whether a perfect cake or a happy marriage. With love, the chemistry is metaphorical, but with baking we are talking literally about a chemical reaction, which is why precision in measurement is so critical.

Ultimately, both cakes and relationships arise from passion and attention, which is where the magic lives. Without that special something that we can’t actually quantify, neither works in the end. This is where the expression “the secret ingredient is love” proves true. You see it when two bakers follow the identical recipe down to the smallest detail, yet their finished products are not the same. The difference lies in the hands that made it, the space it’s made in, and the mood of the baker as it was made. When I began to make challah I learned that one should only make challah dough when one’s soul is in a peaceful place. Time and again it has proven true. When I prepare my dough in a rush or not in my finest moods, the challah emerges dense with a weak rise.

Steady internal peace is as integral a method in baking as in preparing the Shabbat table. I see this in my mother’s kitchen. Yes, she is a phenomenal self-taught cook, but I am a highly trained chef, seasoned both in the professional and home kitchen with a fearless attitude towards trying new recipes (knowing I will fail multiple times before I get it just right). Despite my training with some of Canada’s best chefs

on the one hand, and my mother’s informal *patschke*-ing (fussing) around her kitchen on the other, when I make her chicken soup or mandel bread precisely following every single step of her recipes, my kids will undoubtedly comment with something to the effect of “it’s fine, but Bubbie’s is better.”

Fair, I can’t argue, Bubbie’s is still better and, truthfully, I hope this doesn’t change for many, many years to come. Her hands speak the culinary language of recipes passed down through the generations and we taste the authenticity of her pure love and her dedication to us. Her deep unwavering love shines through at every family meal. One day, when my kids finally suggest that my soups or cookies might be as good as Bubbie’s, I will know I’ve learned the language of our family and the secret to its continuity.

The sun is starting to peek through the window and my quiet kitchen will soon bustle with children and dogs hungry for breakfast. At least a few sleepless, early hours have yielded a mom in a calm state of mind and beautifully aromatic, fresh banana chocolate chip muffins (containing pure natural vanilla, of course). My boys will benefit from both: they devour the muffins while I peacefully unearth lunch boxes, a missing left shoe, and attend to anything else the day demands.

**Dani Plant** is a Heschel parent of two students. She has a culinary skills certificate from the George Brown School of Culinary Arts, and loves spending time experimenting in the kitchen.



# The Infinite Utility of Compassion

BY ARIELLE BERGER

“It is in the process of embracing our imperfections that we find our truest gifts: courage, compassion, and connection.”  
Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection*

“Self-compassion is a way of emotionally recharging our batteries. Rather than becoming drained by helping others, self-compassion allows us to fill up our internal reserves, so that we have more to give to those who need us.”  
Kristin Neff, *Self-Compassion*

To say these past few years have been hard is quite the understatement. We all, parents and children alike, strained and stumbled through ever-changing rules, plans ruined by illness or fear thereof, schools closing and opening and closing again, and for me as a parent, there were days (weeks? months?) when I didn’t know how I would manage parenting another day.

I am told there are people who look back at prior generations, at parents or grandparents who persevered through struggles more difficult than their own, and draw strength from that past, believing they too can and will persevere. My brain is not wired that way. As the grandchild of four Holocaust survivors and the child of parents who came to Canada as refugees, when I look back it usually leads me to feel I have no right to complain, considering how much easier I have it compared to so many others. So what do I do for my own inspiration?

On Rosh Hashanah, introducing the morning service, the prayer leader and the community responsively chant a liturgical poem written in ancient Israel by Rabbi Elazar HaKalir (570–640 CE). Its title is *La’El Orech Din*, “To the Almighty Who Apportions Judgment,” and it describes, in extensive detail, the characteristics of our ultimate judge to whom we are directing our New Year’s prayers. In addition to describing God as one who “examines hearts,” “speaks upright,” “has pity,” and “suppresses anger,” the sixth line reads:

לְתִיק וְעֶשֶׂה חֶסֶד בְּיוֹם דִּין

To [God] Who is steadfast, and yet deals compassionately on the day of judgment.

While in this translation, the word “*vatik*” means steadfast, it can also translate to mean ancient or enduring, embracing our elders and the pious of prior generations within the description. When I read this line, my mind’s eye draws a God who is steadfast in strength and wisdom, whose timelessness witnesses struggles and efforts across many generations, and yet who remains a God who still turns to me personally with compassion in this very moment. Any comparison to what has gone on before me or what may come to be in the years ahead is irrelevant; in the ultimate moment of judgment, each of us is worthy of care and sensitivity. God’s empathic response, an infinite methodology for moving forward, encompasses me.

I am an academic physician and a mom to three young girls. Our medical culture and “mom culture” both profess altruism above all. This leaves no surprise, then, that the storm of struggling kids at home and pandemic conditions at work would lead to burn out. In the process of rebuilding my sense of self, I gained tremendously from the work of two

exceptional scientists and writers whom I would like to highlight here:

1. Dr. Brené Brown, a social science researcher and author, describes the concept of *comparative suffering*. She explains that comparing which hurt or suffering is more worthy comes from a faulty notion that the amount of empathy and compassion available in the world is finite. This is just wrong. Empathy is infinite. And tending to our own hurt and suffering can grow our empathy for others.<sup>1</sup>
2. Dr. Kristin Neff, a professor of educational psychology, defines and operationalizes the construct of *self-compassion* using three core principles:
  - a. Mindfully recognizing that we are hurting;
  - b. Responding to ourselves with warmth and understanding rather than with judgment or denial; and
  - c. Appreciating that suffering, failure, loss, is common to all humanity.<sup>2</sup>

If there is one lesson or one word that stands out for me from my “re-education,” it is compassion. In this regard, I am reminded as well of two individuals who helped me through these few hard years. A dear friend who, no matter how terrible a job I felt I had done as a parent, would somehow let me know I was still okay, allowed to mess up, and was still a “good mom.” And second, my partner, who always found in himself the space to encourage me to ease up and take a break (including three weeks home by myself while he took our children to visit my parents in Jerusalem). Before living it, I couldn’t have imagined how long this pandemic could have lasted, how hard parenting in a pandemic could be, or how many weeks of isolation we would endure. My re-education these past few years has taught me the necessity for self-compassion. Our tradition teaches me the resolve for it.

As we start another year, let us recognize the struggles and triumphs of the past and turn to ourselves with warmth, so that we may continue to lead our children through another year with compassion.

1 Brené Brown, “Comparative Suffering, the 50/50 Myth, and Settling the Ball,” March 27, 2020, Unlocking Us Podcast, <https://brenebrown.com/podcast/brene-on-comparative-suffering-the-50-50-myth-and-settling-the-ball/>. See also Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You’re Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* (Center City, MN: Hazelden Publishing, 2010).

2 Kristin Neff, “Definition of Self-Compassion,” Self-Compassion, accessed August 8, 2020, <https://self-compassion.org/the-three-elements-of-self-compassion-2/>. See also Kristin Neff, *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself* (New York: William Morrow, 2015).

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