

THINK FOCUS N°3

THiNK

THE
LOLA
STEIN
INSTITUTE
JOURNAL

SPECIAL COLLECTION

LEARNING
THROUGH
THE VISUAL ARTS

An abstract painting featuring several hourglass-like shapes outlined in black. The shapes are filled with various colors: a large green one in the center, a smaller brown one to its right, a smaller yellow one to its left, and a large yellow one at the bottom. The background is a mix of pink, blue, and yellow textures.

A PRESENTATION IN HONOUR OF JUDITH LEITNER
CO-FOUNDER OF THE TORONTO HESCHEL SCHOOL
DIRECTOR OF INTEGRATED ARTS 1996–2021



THINK

THE LOLA STEIN INSTITUTE JOURNAL

THINK SPECIAL COLLECTION TEAM

Greg Beiles
Director, The Lola Stein Institute

Pam Medjuck Stein
Editor, THINK Magazine
Chair, The Lola Stein Institute

Dvora Goodman
Coordinator, The Lola Stein Institute

Ava Kwinter
Associate Editor, THINK Magazine

DESIGN & LAYOUT

Sharon Kish
www.sharonkish.com

COPYEDITING & PROOFREADING

Beth McAuley
The Editing Company

INSIDE COVER

This drawing was crafted by a junior high student at The Toronto Heschel School as part of its Integrated Arts curriculum where learning from the masters includes interpreting the work of Marc Chagall.

Integrated Jewish Studies espoused by The Lola Stein Institute in this SPECIAL COLLECTION OF THINK are delivered at The Toronto Heschel School, a Jewish day school in Toronto, Canada.



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.

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

HONOURING MORAH JUDY

4

An Essay in Tribute
Greg Beiles & Pam Medjuck Stein

6

Meet Judith Leitner
A THINK INTERVIEW, PUBLISHED FALL 2010

LOOKING AT THE BIG PICTURE

10

The Artist at Work

14

How do I love thee,
O Artist Statements!
Let me count the ways
Lisa Rendely

16

The Arts, Creativity, and Respect
Judith Leitner

18

These Walls Can Talk
Lisa Rendely

PROJECTS IN THE SPOTLIGHT

22

The Art Minyan
A NEW WAY INTO PRAYER FOR JUNIOR HIGH
Yarden Bourlas

24

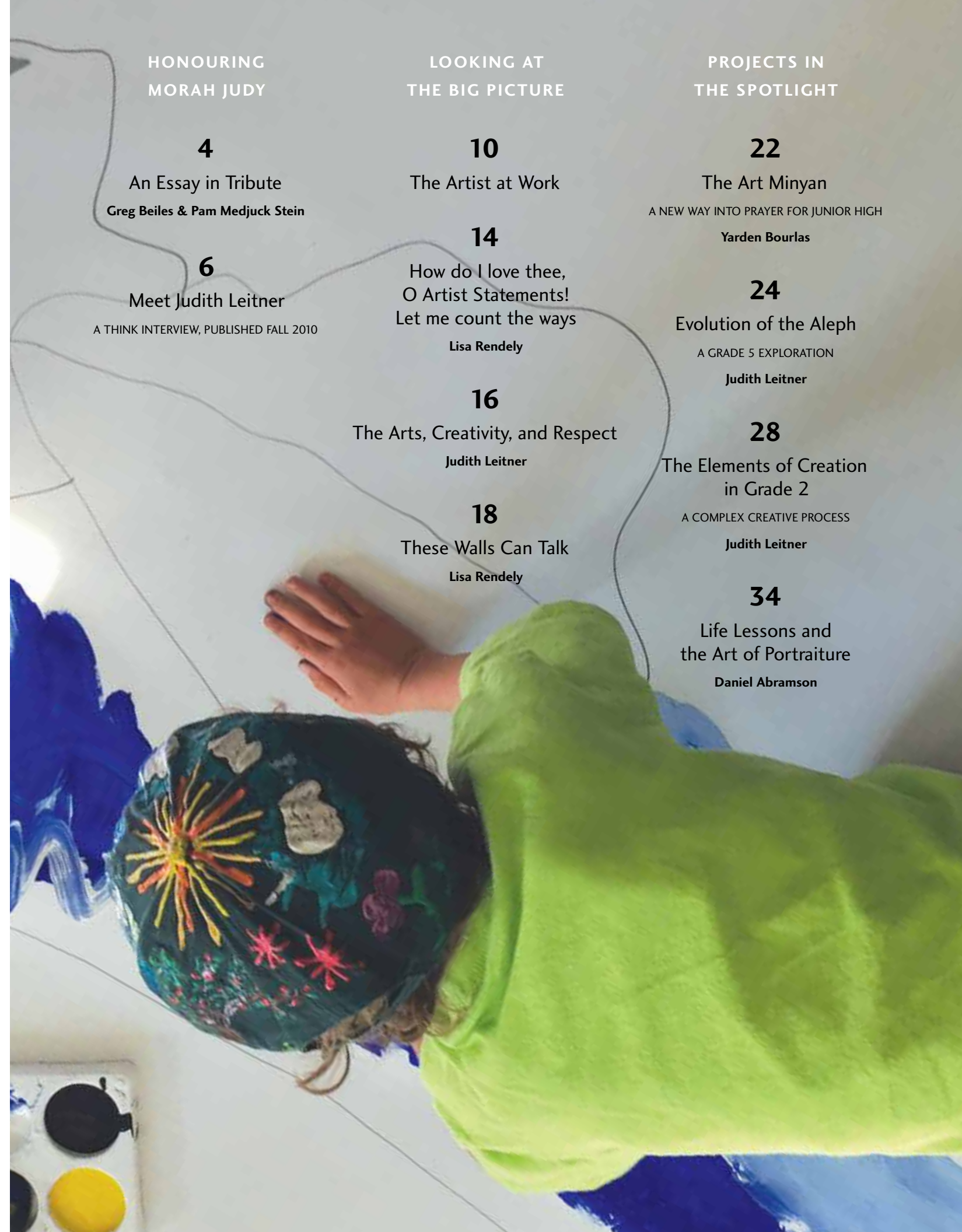
Evolution of the Aleph
A GRADE 5 EXPLORATION
Judith Leitner

28

The Elements of Creation
in Grade 2
A COMPLEX CREATIVE PROCESS
Judith Leitner

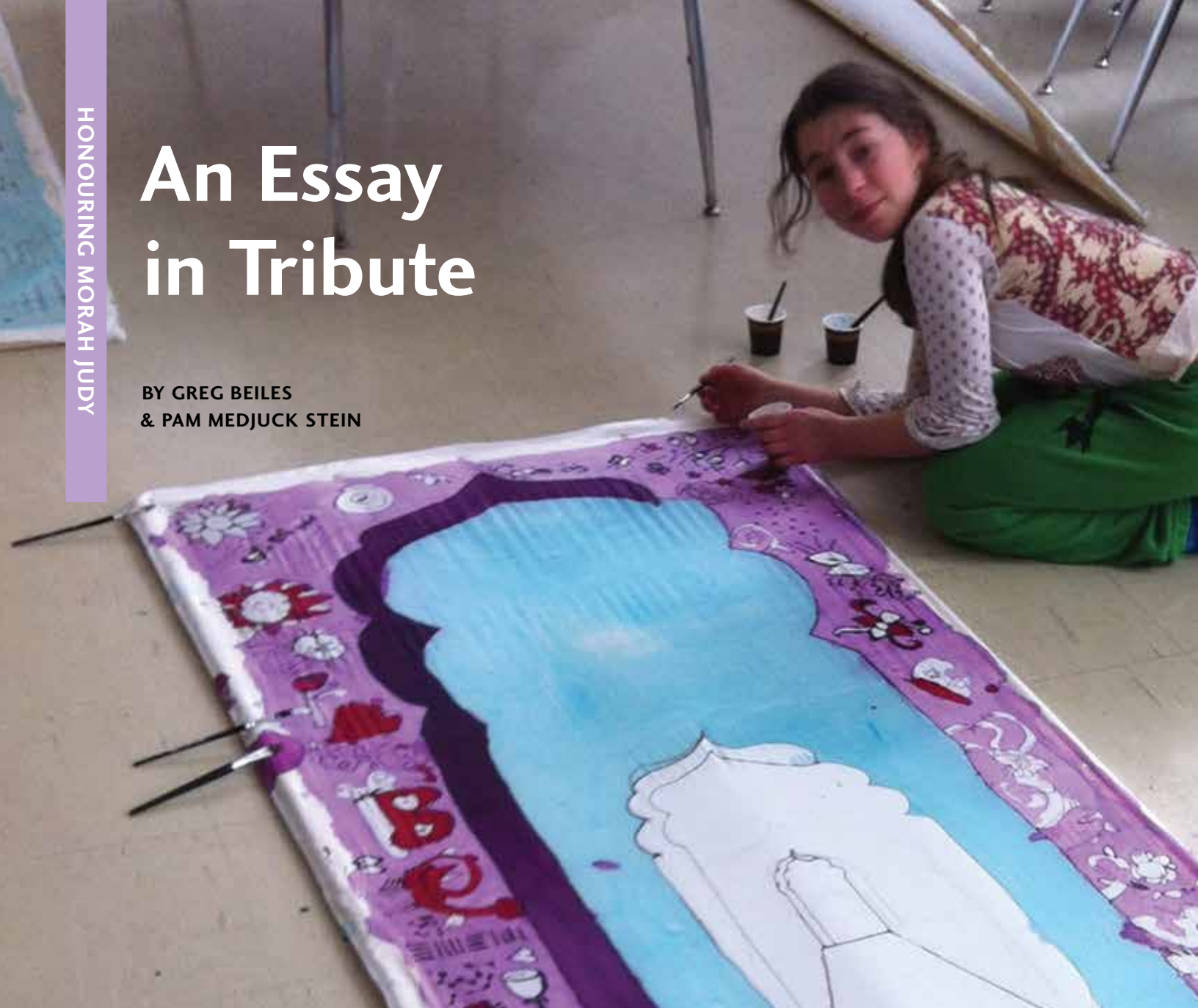
34

Life Lessons and
the Art of Portraiture
Daniel Abramson



An Essay in Tribute

BY GREG BEILES
& PAM MEDJUCK STEIN



It is a daunting task to create, polish, and deliver a Jewish day school curriculum that is learned through the arts, blends Judaic and universal content, and succeeds in graduating high-achieving students who are artists, advocates, and inventors. This Special Collection showcases different aspects of how learning through the arts transpires at The Toronto Heschel School, learning that has been imagined, shaped, and animated by Morah Judith Leitner. It is an anthology of articles published previously in THINK: The Lola Stein Institute Journal over the past decade along with a few new pieces that show how Judith Leitner's mentorship is bearing fruit.

As a co-founder of The Toronto Heschel School, Morah Judy has been an inspirational and dedicated teacher, leader, and friend to everything Heschel since 1996. She led the school as Director of Integrated Arts these past 25 years and retired in January 2021. Her creativity, insight into children's learning, and devotion to the artist in each and every one of us have motivated and strengthened our children, faculty, school families, and school leaders. Her vision for the Jewish arts and for how the arts in general can be integrated across the curriculum is indelibly imprinted on the soul of our school.

Morah Judith led students to think like artists, to see themselves as creators who learn from the masters and give back whatever they can to their friends and community. She advocated for the artist mindset, an attitude and posture that sets students up for lives of awe, wonder, and discovery. This mindset is introduced to very young children at Toronto Heschel thanks to Morah Judith's initial vision and persistent focus. She set in motion a school tradition that ignites the transformation very early in the curriculum: she had four-year-old children painting with sunlight and shadow on sun-sensitive paper; elementary students folding hundreds of origami cranes for peace; students painting,

drawing, photographing, and sculpting self-portraits year after year as they grew, continually exploring themselves, their life experiences, and their expressions. Her students became artists who examined their evolving identities; they got messy, assumed creative risks, and learned how to move mindfully through multiple complex steps in well-planned sequences one step at a time.

Morah Judith's mode of pedagogy provides students with real training in the ability to articulate their ideas. Her trademark is twinning soulfulness with explication. Her students are adept in reviewing their own work and revising it wholeheartedly; they learn to manage the judgment of others and, importantly, to know how to pick up their work from where it may be and move forward. Thinking, refining, and managing are life skills of pervasive value and Morah Judith taught them by design.

It is often said that the arts call up the humanity in each student. Morah Judith worked closely with this opportunity on a daily basis. Her rigour and her passion enlightened her students on the strength that comes through pride in accomplishment; feeling a part of something excellent and shining would embolden them to strive for ever higher standards. Art with Morah Judith connected every child personally to the very real possibility of stellar attainable achievement.

Morah Judith often cited Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's invocation "to build one's life as if it were a work of art." And then she would say, "You are the artist!" Her mantra is a magnificent lesson for our children and a beautiful legacy for our school. Thank you, Morah Judith!

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

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





Creating wide opportunities for learning and expression is what learning through the arts is all about.

Meet Judith Leitner

A THINK INTERVIEW, PUBLISHED FALL 2010

What does “arts-based” mean?

Our school is neither an art school nor a performing arts school. “Arts-based” puts focus on educational process, not product. We teach through the arts, using music, dance, drama, visual arts, and storytelling as tools to develop a student’s understanding of the curriculum.

The arts underpin the learning in all subjects. For example, the Grade 6 “Eco-Seder” mines the Passover Haggadah for environmental themes. Beyond celebration of the Exodus, Pesach is also a festival of spring, renewal, memory, and hope. A package of texts relates to each section of the Haggadah with a thematic introduction, a scientific article with questions, and a math activity in data management. Students prepare the Eco-Seder in language arts, science, mathematics, and visual arts classes, and ultimately present the relationship between Pesach and the environment through an installation that includes a sculpture, a three-dimensional math graph, and their individual “artist statements.” They set up a sculpture gallery of their installations in the order of the Hagaddah, standing by their work to explain their Eco-Seder to their peers and parents.

How does learning through the arts enrich education?

When the learning is experiential and challenging, the learning process is etched in one’s memory. Learning through the arts enables children to bridge knowledge and transfer thinking skills between disciplines, nurturing what Professor Howard Gardner calls “the integrative mind.” Learners have enriched opportunities to self-express, pose questions, and build self-confidence.¹

Why are aesthetics important to your teaching?

An appreciation for, and understanding of, creating one’s personal sense of beauty are fundamental to us as human beings. Aesthetics offer an excellent forum for self-expression



and self-understanding. But, we are not discussing “beauty” as an ideal, nor constructing it as an objective (as in, Is this beautiful?).

Point of view and tolerance for others’ ways of seeing are paramount to our educational philosophy, just as experiential learning is core to the structure of our curriculum. When children engage in art-making of all kinds, they experience limitless opportunities to express their point of view and tolerate others’ ways.

What does arts-based learning look like?

It is a perpetual and evolving display. Artworks are always on view; as works-in-progress and as completed pieces. Display advocates for ongoing progress, effort, and achievement, children teaching children. Signage accompanies the displays, so that as students walk the corridors they see titles, interdisciplinary integration, learning goals, descriptions of artful thinking, and listed resources such as Chumash or Talmudic texts, math formulae, authors, and artist statements.

What impact does arts-integration have on your students?

Self-esteem comes with excelling. When children believe in the possibility that they can excel, they sense the opportunity they each hold for personal statement and creative power. Excelling means understanding one’s own process as positive, even while work is incomplete or an idea not fully developed. Excelling means finding new perspectives, seeing “mistakes” as superb windows of opportunity for learning and for reflection, which is part of the natural process for all creative thinkers. I see excellence when I see effort that goes beyond self-perception, with a willingness for creative risk. Self-esteem comes with a sense of accomplishment, both on a personal level and as part of a community of learners.

¹ H. Gardner, *Five Minds for the Future* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2006).



LOOKING AT THE BIG PICTURE



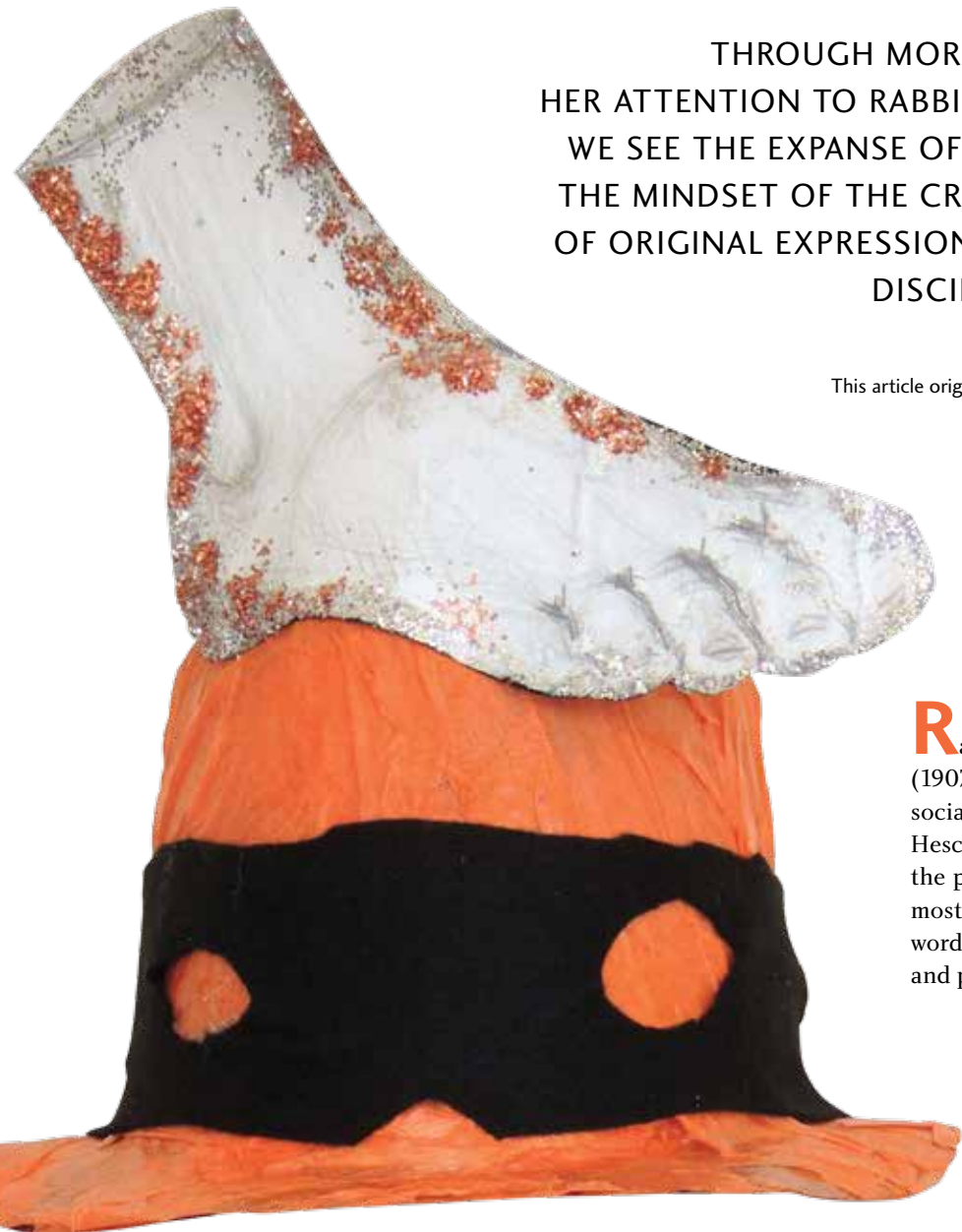
This Grade 1 mural reflects children running to contribute their skills and generosity—minds and hearts—to build what their class holds precious: "*nadiv lev v'chacham lev.*"

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 #22, Spring 2018.

Rav 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: 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)



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)



How do I love thee, O Artist Statements! Let me count the ways

BY LISA RENDELY

I have heard our beloved Morah Judith Leitner ask a whole class of kindergarten students “Who’s the artist?” with each enthusiastically shouting back at her, full of confidence and *emunah*, “I am!” To give young people the conviction that they are artists, that they are what they create, brings value into our world. It is one of the greatest gifts that we can give our students.

Only a true artist and gifted educator would consider having even the youngest students identify their artwork with a sincerely thought-through title and compose an equally personal artist statement. Morah Judy, a co-founder of The Toronto Heschel School and my art teaching mentor, is that very artist-educator. Judith Leitner taught me to respect each student I teach as an independent authentic creator. She encouraged me to embolden students to take creative risks in their artistic decisions, and to approach art-making with reverence, trusting their hearts and instincts. Now I ask my own students, “Who’s the artist?”

So why do I love the asking so much? I love it because a student’s self-identification as an artist opens a window into the young artist’s soul, one that lets me peer in as their teacher. I can then collaborate step by step and support my students as they assume ownership of their work, their thoughts, their lives.

The crafting of an artist statement delivers strong educational value for students and teachers alike. When artists speak or write about their work, they reveal the *why* behind their expressions and, while their articulations voice their decisions, they also render visible the missed opportunities. This looking into the *how* and *why* of decisions elucidates what came intuitively and what was serendipitous; it shows me, their teacher, as much about which skills have been mastered and which need work. I can then help students to solve problems and bring the artwork that they envision



Through the practice of saying what they mean,
students are setting themselves up for life.

into being. Every element in a work of art is a function of choice, just like every other decision we make as we move through our day.

Reading my students’ artist statements brings me closer to understanding what’s going on inside their heads. They will often write down what they won’t share verbally, and I watch this articulation extend their self-awareness as artists and as human beings. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that we must remember to build our life “as if it were a work of art.” Before children can conceive or plan the masterpiece that we hope will become their lives, we must first help them learn what it means to develop, craft, fix, and claim a piece of creative work.

First, the opportunity to name an artwork signifies that it has value—students receive their names from their parents, and now it’s their turn to identify and claim what they have created and feel responsible for what they are developing. While the art can and does speak for itself, the title and artist statement validate the voice of the artist, especially those too shy to share openly and those who need an invitation to claim their point of view. Bringing students to see themselves as artists names them as such and confers on each of them the dignity of being valued; their particular voice, their personal opinion, and their very own artwork matter. Artist statements become like a diary, a personal record for students to trace the ideas and insights that mark their growth.

Crafting an artist statement requires that students reflect on their work not once, but twice. They focus first during the creative process itself, and then they think again, often quite deeply, on what it was that they had been considering during the period of creative flow. Meaningful personal reflection builds three important character strengths: effort, humility, and courage. I am also an artist and when I look at my own artwork I analyze what worked and what didn’t, and I am trained to do this objectively with a critical eye. Writing an artist statement trains my students to evaluate their own efforts and become empowered by the beauty they have brought into the world; it also provides practise in concisely articulating ideas that are complex and personal. My art students are in training to say what they mean and this important skill will serve their future schooling, careers, and relationships as a firm foundation for critical self-reflection

and self-expression. I am afforded a glimpse into how my students prioritize as they make decisions. I see how the cogs turned as they conceived their idea, the method by which they brought it to life, what they chose to do or omit, where they made a tactical error (have you thought of glue...?) or if they avoided something in particular. Their articulations surface which of their ideas came in a snap and which they agonized over through a period of time.

Through their honesty, I become privy to my students’ insecurities and ambitions. They mine treasures from experiences they had while creating their work. I have seen them unearth true insight into their personal way of being, and observed them reach a level of metacognitive understanding that they may not have otherwise attained. This includes interdisciplinary connections between ideas studied across curricula, integrating Jewish and universal learning, as well as revelations that were surprising both to themselves and their reader.

Over the years, my students have learned—and shared with me—that they don’t need sparkles on their artwork to see it has value. They have also learned to begin their work earlier, not to be so hard on themselves, and that taking risks leads them to incredible results. The process of writing artist statements leads to self-discovery because it lays out what hasn’t been seen before. It exposes our artists to themselves.

As I consider what each of my students creates and I read their artist statements, I learn a lot about myself, their teacher. I feel myself awakening again and again to an authentic fresh process of discovery, and it is my privilege to do so. I’m not just seeing a beautiful work of art. I’m getting to know it from the inside out. Through the practice of saying what they mean, students are setting themselves up for life. They can describe and pursue their intentions as the work of art that Rabbi Heschel suggests. They can do it because they truly believe that *they* are artists, just as Morah Judy said.

Lisa Rendely teaches integrated visual art at The Toronto Heschel School. Trained as an architect, she later earned a Master of Teaching degree conducting research into art-integrated education. She recently completed the Legacy Heritage Foundation’s Teacher Leadership program through Brandeis University.

The arts leverage students' ability to think critically and act creatively; they lead children to communicate profound thoughts and feelings.

The Arts, Creativity, and Respect

BY JUDITH LEITNER

This article originally appeared in THINK #2, June 2008.

A child's creation of a painting, dance, or story in many ways parallels the creation of a life to live. Authenticity and aesthetic sensitivity are core to a wonderful work of art and also lie at the heart of a meaningful life. Learning through the arts advances skills in the art of living.

One of an educator's primary goals is to craft creative learning environments that foster self-respect and positive self-image where students learn to recognize and trust their instincts and individual strengths. To create such learning environments we integrate the visual arts, music, dance, drama, and storytelling into all learning. Days spent learning through artistic processes embed habits of respect in student routines. The arts cut through differences in learning styles and culture. They are languages that children learn to speak and they bring an entire curriculum to life, turning abstractions into concrete reality.

When learning through the arts, children ask the same questions they pose in daily life. What do I see? What do I know now? What do I do now? If I do this, then what will happen to that? Why didn't I think of that before? Why doesn't anyone else understand what I meant? How can I help them understand? What do I need to express this idea and complete my plan? Can we figure this out together?

The Classroom

Our classroom is a richly textured learning environment, a shared work space, where students recognize and respect each other's learning styles and materials. Here discussions leading to the expression of ideas through music, visual arts,

dance, and storytelling allow students and teachers to practise the art of respectful communication as well as attentive listening.

Collaborative, project-based learning (learning *b'chevrutah*) accommodates diverse thinking styles and leads students to appreciate each other's skills, artistry, and hard work. (Did they really decorate the walls of the Temple because people couldn't read? What did the decorations do?)

The Person

The poet, playwright, and painter e.e. cummings observed that:

We do not believe in ourselves until someone reveals that deep inside us is a valuable individual, worth listening to, worthy of our trust, sacred to our touch. Once we believe in ourselves we can risk curiosity, wonder, spontaneous delight or any experience that reveals the human spirit.

From the earliest ages students ponder their humanity (Who am I?). Human dignity, *tzedek*, reverence for our precious environment and our homes are themes and inquiries that are central to who we are. Through the arts we seek to understand our hopes, dreams, and unanswered questions. When seen through a Jewish lens, they are central to our program.

The Group

We encourage children to think and feel their way through

themes and concepts. First, through intellect and emotion and then through a variety of artistic channels, they express what they have learned. Students perform their understanding to crystallize their thoughts. This enriches the learning.

Rewriting the biblical books of Samuel, Shakespearean plays, or the Haggadah into their own style, culture, and era is one very clear example. Illustration of poems or historical themes is another. It's digestion.

Peer sharing is fundamental to a culture of *derech erez*, the ethical way. The practice of peer sharing advances critical listening, observing, and reflecting. Children guide and teach each other. Creative learning becomes visible and community life is made concrete. (Do you think we still live as strangers in a strange land? Why do some people mind being with strangers, but others don't?)

Sharing in a large group engages students to frame thoughtful questions and offer astute observations. In hallway exhibitions they explore alone or with classmates and take time to understand fellow artists' unique ways of thinking. (Wow, look what she did! How did he make this?)

The arts leverage a student's ability to think critically and act creatively. They lead students to formulate and communicate profound thoughts and feelings. These are important life skills and they require practise.

Children become accustomed to reflect and interpret their thoughts as these thoughts are evoked daily by events and processes. With practise and gradual ease the children attain access to their own instincts and emotions. This self-awareness applies widely as time and experiences accrue.





The hallways are simultaneously a curated gallery, learning space, and communication zone.

These Walls Can Talk

BY LISA RENDELY

This article originally appeared in THINK #25, Fall 2019.

The hallways of our school echo its sensibilities. It's a moment of revelation to notice why. The subtlety, morality, and insight that comprise The Toronto Heschel School recipe resound in its corridor displays. Yes, the walls manifest how the student artwork is created. Yes, they detail the media, artists-in-residence, and cross-curricular connections. But more than that, the walls articulate the student experience. Each display shares a multi-dimensional microcosm of the layered learning behind each work of art, artifact, or photograph. The hallways reverberate with dynamism. These walls can talk.

The classrooms themselves burst with creative energy; student artwork, art posters, and signage create a deliberate aesthetic environment that is geared towards learning. But what's fascinating to notice is how the classroom atmosphere flows into the hallways which become simultaneously a curated gallery, learning space, and communication zone. All areas of the building—entrances, corridors, gathering spaces—contain revolving and well-documented exhibitions of student productivity. The walls show projects—finished and work in progress—that consumed days or months of intense effort.

The presentation compels a continual dialogue between the pedagogy that is Toronto Heschel and its students, teachers, and parents. Onlookers have a chance to appreciate the educational strategy patently at work. Like a gallery, each artwork is labelled and presented with signage that articulates the intentions, media, and precedents behind each display. The presentation exposes what Toronto Heschel educators have in mind when devising the projects that are in effect performances of student understanding; it explains how they have woven together particular subject areas to create one holistic, inquiry-based, and challenging learning experience. The goal is that all viewers understand the artistry in context.

For Grade 7, for example, a teacher team collaborates to integrate and celebrate the High Holy Days artfully. The class studies the text of the *Unetana Tokef*, a *piyyut* (poem) of the Yom Kippur liturgy. In Language Arts class, the students analyze the prayer and the symmetry and balance of each phrase: "Who shall live and who shall die / Who shall perish by water and who by fire." In Mishnah class, they study the meaning and Judaic significance of these questions. Then they enter the art room, where the third step is to illustrate

selected phrases with Mark Rothko's colour-block canvasses as inspiration. Assessing colours and proportions to reflect, for example, "who by fire," brings deeper thinking; some see flame as red, while others interpret it as blue, black, or grey. A *shofar* might be added, again with scale, proportion, colour, and directionality in mind, interpreting Mishnaic thought. The result is a room washed in dramatic shades and perspectives, each graphically and personally expressed. Then their learning pervades the school. Their powerful interpretive works grace the hallways, multi-purpose area, classrooms, and gathering places.

Another sharing comes with the beautifully painted silk *tallitot* (prayer shawls) that hang in the second-floor windows, creating a stained-glass effect as light streams through. For this project, students delved into Jewish liturgy. They chose a word or phrase from a *bracha* (a blessing) that reflected their personal *kavannah l'tefillah* (commitment to prayer) and they painted the selected words onto the *tallitot*. The project blends the students' years of artistic expression with their years of text study. Having become practised artists in manipulating form and design, they can now use them to convey deep meaning. The final product is a visual symphony of colour, pattern, and texture. Like the Rothko-inspired Yom Kippur ideations above, the process of painting the *tallitot* enable each student to reach for and then share personal statements that derive from their own text study. The variety of visible expression is as wondrous to younger students as it is to the artists. The room glows with diverse personalities, real textual knowledge, and the connection that these students feel to their Jewish identities.

The displays are a function of intentional stewardship. The idea is to demonstrate respect and reverence for the work and the artist and to underscore that this artwork and these artists warrant attention. Insight into process helps. Parents who see their child's learning in action know what to talk about in school hallways and at home with respect to what's going on in their classes. The casual line "Tell me about your artwork" releases the floodgates of important conversations.

Earned respect is significant to child development and sense of self. A curated exhibition of artistic accomplishment delivers real approbation to an artist, whether in Junior Kindergarten or Grade 8. It is a public acknowledgement of the demanding journey which the children have travelled.

Conversely, knowing that their work will be visible, it also nurtures in them a sense of diligence and accountability. Knowing the transparent end, they persist through their projects with time, care, and precision, whether in ceramics, paintings, drawings, prints, or 3D sculptures.

Validating and valuing student learning is a core principle of The Toronto Heschel School. Naming the model artists whom the children have studied—Mark Rothko, who inspires Grade 7 painting, or Wassily Kandinsky, who is artist-in-residence for Senior Kindergarten—venerates those who inspire us and contextualizes student art. By treating each grade with equal sincerity—the same standard of signage, wall space, and rigour—the school shows that it prioritizes and treasures all student work. This is an important reflection back to the students who see that their work means something to their community, understand that it is valued, and acclimatize to the notion that their ideas matter. Seeing one's art on display stirs complex emotions that contribute to anyone's sense of self.

Students' daily viewing of projects and artwork made by students in other grades is part of the plan. Just passing by on their way to French, math, or gym ignites a spark of learning. The visual cues in the hallways trigger excitement for projects they will get to create one day as well as memories of past learning. The older students understand the various displays well and reconnect familiar ideas to their current studies albeit with a more developed understanding. The students causally come to notice how their learning spirals upwards, and their expressions spiral up right along with it. They sense how learning to use a grid to copy a work of art in Grade 4 becomes a useful skill when reproducing a Marc Chagall painting in Grade 6, and later when drawing a self-portrait in Grade 8. They appreciate how their ability to draw a line learned in JK repeats as a series of basic shapes in Grade 3 and complex still-life drawings in Grade 4. They accumulate the intrinsic understanding that learning accumulates.

"Next year we get to do that!" a Grade 1 student said excitedly as he walked past ceramic artwork made by Grade 2 students, a new exhibit freshly installed. The anticipation was palpable and his sentiment rippled through the class as they walked single file, down the hallway to music class. A new display! Fresh artwork! What joy!

PROJECTS IN THE SPOTLIGHT



Crafted in ceramic by Grade 7 students, these heartfelt faces from ancient times bring story and character to life.

The Art Minyan

A NEW WAY INTO PRAYER
FOR JUNIOR HIGH

BY YARDEN BOURLAS

One of the best parts of being a teacher is collaborating with colleagues who are in possession of rare and remarkable talents. At The Toronto Heschel School, I work with Eric Cohen who has an expertise in music, *tefillah* (prayer), and all things Torah, and Lisa Rendely who is the queen of integrating art with any subject. Together the three of us adapted our usual *niggun minyan*, or singing prayer circle, by integrating it with art, so that students could participate safely since singing out loud is not an option during COVID-19.

Every Jewish educator knows the tremendous amount of creativity required to present daily prayer as an interesting and meaningful practice. One of our solutions has been to lead a *kavannah minyan* on Wednesdays. The word *kavannah* means intention, and we have combined *tefillah* (prayer) with mindful practices such as meditation, song, and yoga, enabling students to embody *tefillot* rather than recite them in the routine manner. This year, 2020–21, has been a year of meeting challenges with flexibility and innovation and, as is so often the case, we found that with respect to the *kavannah minyan* something extremely fruitful lay on the other side of this creative process. Having spent the last few years developing the *yoga minyan*, I was happy to lend my experience to the creation of an all-new *kavannah minyan* for our Junior High students. In the following conversation, Lisa Rendely and Eric Cohen share how they developed an *art minyan* to lead their students in art and prayer during these pandemic times.

YARDEN: Lisa, how did the *art minyan* get started?

LISA: It began as a response to COVID-19 and the inability to run our *niggun*, or singing, *minyan* as we normally would. One of our school protocols to avoid the spread of COVID-19 has been to put singing on hold for the time being. As this presented a big problem for our *niggun minyan*, we decided to maintain the musical focus by integrating visual art with the music as an added extra dimension. We asked students to concentrate on listening to *tefillot* being sung in a variety of traditions and to represent visually what they heard.

YARDEN: To help students avoid depicting God and prayer figuratively, which is not part of the Jewish tradition, we restricted the *art minyan* to non-representational expression. As an art teacher, how did you manage this?

LISA: We asked students to focus on abstraction and use only three elements of art: line, shadow, and pattern. The first week they would listen to the *Shema* service, for example, and while listening, they would draw only using lines in response to what they were hearing. These could be a series of short lines or long sinuous lines. In the second week, the *minyan* would again listen to the *Shema*, now sung in a different tune and tradition, and respond by layering shadows onto the lines they had already drawn. In the third week they heard the *Shema* in the styling of a third melody, but now expressed their feeling by sketching patterns across the same drawing.

It was important that they use the same sheet of paper each week. That way they could actually see the interweaving and overlapping of traditions in Judaism; the same prayer calling out through different voices and styles brought each student to create an individualized visual *siddur*.

YARDEN: Eric, you are so great at showing us how different cultures experience Jewish liturgy. Can you tell me a bit about that?

ERIC: This is actually something so dear to me. I think the Heschel School has come a really long way in exposing students to different types of rituals and cultures within Judaism. We're all accustomed to the usual Jewish day school cantillation of the *tefillah* in all its various segments. We know how to sing the *Shema*; we have our special tunes for the *Amidah*; and we have our own Heschel tune for *Baruch Sheamar*. But this *art minyan* was an opportunity to introduce students to listening to a diverse range of traditional tunes.

YARDEN: Can you give a few examples?

ERIC: Sure. In the *art minyan* we move between some *Hasidische* Eastern European *trope* (musical expression in prayer) and, for instance, melodies with a Moroccan or Andalusian feel, the Judeo/Spanish/Arabic traditions of prayer—*Nussach*, is what we call it in Hebrew.

We also focus on the pronunciation of words according to the different rites and take on different types of the liturgy itself. We opened the oldest existing *siddur* manuscript, the *Saadia Siddur*, and sang from it using an Iraqi tune system and pronunciation.

What this does for the expression of visual art, I do not know to be honest, but it does tune the ear to different melodies, pronunciations, and customs, and this exposure is one of the goals of this program.

YARDEN: Let's ask the artist. Lisa, what do you think the students learn from the process of hearing different tunes and layering one expression over another and another?

LISA: In many ways the overlapping, layering, and building resemble life lived. We all have iterative experiences that accumulate to create a personal collection of dreams and prayers. We are constantly building our own lives. Our ideas are not finished. The *art minyan* cultivates new inspiration for routine prayers and asks students to look at their interpretations anew each week. The artwork might look exquisite at the beginning and yet it's not complete. As our experiences add up, we bring more to our prayers. The students are in effect building their own *siddur*.

YARDEN: *Shema* means Listen! or Hear! What do you see as the relationship here between listening and art?

LISA: There is a very strong connection. To create a visual representation of something that you hear requires an artist to sink into the different "frequencies," so to speak, and to think on different levels. The act of expressing something that you have heard visually is prominent in art. For example, Wassily Kandinsky depicted music using line, colour, and shape to relay frequencies of sound, harmonies, and tones.

In the *art minyan*, students carefully attune to what they are hearing and mindfully express what they feel.

YARDEN: You mentioned the word mindful. How does the process of this *art minyan* train students in a practice of mindfulness?

LISA: There is, of course, a very mindful element to creating art but, while facilitating the *art minyan*, I observed that the students were silent as they listened and created. They were so "in the moment," so absorbed in their work, that no one noticed as I walked around the room taking photos. To me, this manifests mindfulness—to be focused and trained on what you are doing, to be engrossed and alert to your senses and body and mind. Students' ears were activated by unfamiliar cadence, pronunciation, tones, tunes, and accentuations of *niggunim* so different from the Ashkenazi music they sing daily. The activity of listening and drawing brought them into a new frame of mind. In that new mental space they trained their ears on the melodies and their hands put the new sounds on paper; they were working with intention, with *kavannah*.

Our goal was to have students experience *tefillah* in a meaningful, meditative, and embodied way.

YARDEN: *Tefillah* is a practice, something to do daily to get you into a flow state. Would you say they were in that state?

LISA: A person achieves flow when engaged in a task that demands full attention and generates energized focus. It brings a sense of joy and calm. Watching the students draw as they listened to Eric sing, I could see that they were absolutely in a flow state.

YARDEN: Is it different from how students tend to participate in more typical *tefillah* practice?

LISA: Students are very comfortable in their traditional *tefillah*. The *art minyan* motivates them to engage with prayer in a new way, not better or worse, but different. It seems to elicit the commitment or intention that is *kavannah*. When I was facilitating the *art minyan*, I could definitely see students participating with true *kavannah*, with their whole heart.

YARDEN: I agree with Lisa. There is something incredibly satisfying about seeing a room full of teenagers completely absorbed in the act of listening to Jewish liturgy, sung in a variety of traditions all the while tracing out the lines of sound, shading in feelings and fears, and weaving patterns of prayers on the page. If our goal was to have students experience *tefillah* in a meaningful, meditative, and embodied way, I am happy to say we achieved it.

Yarden Bourlas teaches Grade 8 science and art and oversees The Toronto Heschel School environmental program.



Evolution of the Aleph

A GRADE 5 EXPLORATION

BY JUDITH LEITNER

This article originally appeared in THINK #17, Fall 2015.

The alphabet is one of the most fundamental inventions in human communication. It enables the preservation and clear understanding of people's thoughts and allows human experiences to be shared. Through the alphabet's earliest evolution from pictures and shapes to sounds, it integrated ancient oral and visual cultures and propelled the art of listening towards the arts of reading and writing. For many scholars of anthropology and history, entire civilizations were founded upon this astonishing innovation.

The Hebrew alphabet is called the Aleph Bet. It is a codified system of 22 letters that evolved throughout the ancient Near East over a period of about 900 years. One compelling theory alleges that the Aleph Bet began its linguistic journey as Egyptian hieroglyphics, pictograms endowed with symbolic meanings. Gradually the pictures' shapes shifted and changed into written signs or characters, called phonograms, each expressing a specific sound.

By about 1500 B.C.E., Proto-Sinaitic had emerged as a west-Semitic script. It then developed into Proto-Canaanite or Old Hebrew, whose main offshoots were the Phoenecian, Ancient Hebrew, and Aramaic alphabetical systems around 1000 B.C.E. These alphabets eventually became the ancestors of the Roman alphabet we use today.

In a wonderful Grade 5 project, "The Evolution of the Aleph," we render the Hebrew alphabet visible as an abundant linguistic, historical, and Judaic springboard for student learning. We designed this integrative visual arts curriculum asking ourselves the essential Toronto Heschel School question: How can we foster a rich intersection of thinking, knowledge, art, and ethical behaviour in this learning experience?

This visual arts exploration takes place concurrent to the Grade 5 civilizations curriculum, entitled "The Force of Human Innovation." The latter brings students to ponder

the questions: What need did a specific invention address in ancient societies and cultures? What structures were in place that let artful specialists give shape to important novel concepts? What resources were available to the inventors? Who used the inventions? How were they disseminated and adapted throughout time and in distant place? Today, as cutting-edge creations circulate at lightning-speed, we wonder how these ancient inventions and innovations transformed civilizations.

Today, as cutting-edge creations circulate at lightning-speed, we wonder how these ancient inventions and innovations transformed civilizations.

The Aleph Bet study fits in as an ancient innovation that transformed society. We guide our students to become thinkers and to wonder how we can understand the ways that speech can be preserved, noted down, and transmitted. We look into the creative process underlying the art of writing; how did writing evolve from spoken word, to image, to sound, and to an ordered alphabetic system? Our process with the students has two phases: exploration and creation.

1. Exploration

As scholars of the ancient world, our students first investigate the evolution of the different letters of the Aleph Bet from a historical and linguistic perspective. We examine the social, cultural, and religious needs addressed by the invention of the art of writing in ancient Near Eastern civilizations. We analyze the Aleph Bet's visual vocabulary, the pictures and

their symbolism, and its roots in Egyptian hieroglyphs. We study the Hebrew letters' linguistic trajectories and the conventions that propelled them from shapes to sounds, and eventually, to a set of interrelated signs.

As Judaic scholars we wonder how we can imagine and contemplate our biblical ancestors and the complexities of their lives and times. We consider their ongoing relationship with ancient Egypt and correlate the development of the Aleph Bet. We explore the profound impact that the creation of the Aleph Bet had upon modes of communication in the ancient Near East and, ultimately, upon the development of our Judaic heritage.

2. Creation

As artists, we wonder how we can imagine and explore the creative mindset of the innovators who artfully propelled the evolution of writing from shape to sound. To do this we first evaluate the evolution of the Aleph Bet from a design perspective. We study the fundamental elements and principles of design and their application to poster art. Students research the art and craft of the poster and use models made by artists from Cuba. We revisit the art and craft of oil paste/watercolour to add texture to our artwork.

We also take time to think about the art of typography, and the importance of engaging with each letter's formal qualities. We meet the individual persona of the 22 Hebrew letters, treating each as a separate graphic symbol with its own design history and cultural legacy. Each student artist chooses a Hebrew letter whose evolution speaks to his/her heart, and designs a poster that graphically tracks the evolving stages of that specific letter, including an original drawing of the object that became the hieroglyph.

We divide up our canvas into seven sections—one for each stage in a Hebrew letter's development, and we embed

How can we foster a rich intersection of thinking, knowledge, art, and ethical behaviour in this learning experience?

design elements and principles in our creative choices. As a final step, the students each write an artist statement that describes their artwork and creative choices, illuminates their artistic challenges, and contemplates the question: What do I know now that I did not know before, now that I have made art? The collective work is then exhibited in The Toronto Heschel School's hallways, as is our artful practice.

As an artists' collective, we are ever mindful of ethical behaviour in the art room, *derech erez*. We look to the ways that we share our ideas; we respect our learning space (public and private), and our art materials and resources; and we reflect on fellow artists' thinking and working styles.

As we teach and reflect upon what we learn in "The Evolution of the Aleph," we continue to pose the questions that are core to The Toronto Heschel School's way: How can we encourage the connection of knowledge, logic, and beauty? Are we evoking visual delight and conceptual fascination? And, most importantly, are our learners experiencing a sense of awe and wonder as they engage in this lyrical visual interpretation—this *Midrash*?

Turn the page and see the graphics!

Judith Leitner co-founded The Toronto Heschel School in 1996 and since then has served as the Director of Arts, team-designing and teaching the integrative Judaic arts curriculum. In 1991 she founded the Integrated Arts Programme at She'arim Hebrew Day School. Judith is equally passionate about documentary photography; her recent exhibitions include "Serene Passage: A Traveller's Prayer at Ground Zero, Madrid and Shanghai" (Arta Gallery 2011 and Darchei Noam 2014); "My Voice, Through My Lens" (MaRS Discovery District, June 2014), and "Embedded: Personal Identity through Job:19" (Contact Photography Festival 2015).



Evolution of the Aleph

1

We begin with the Aleph's ancient hieroglyphic graphic: a pictogram of a full-bodied ox. The ox pictogram symbolized strength and power and, read aloud, is thought to have been pronounced as *aluf*. From the point of view of communication, we ask: What is the problem with this picture? We wonder: Does it mean, "I have an ox," "I need an ox," or "I lost my ox."



2

We then explore how the pictogram was reduced to an ox's head and horns, over a period of about 600 years. We note that the image continues to represent the idea of an ox. Again, we consider the problems this ideogram creates as a mode of communication. We imagine its possible references: "My three oxen went over a mountain!" or "I know you stole six oxen from me!"



3

We observe how the ox ideogram was further reduced in the span of 300 years or so to an even leaner version of itself. Only the horns are represented with the head now symbolized by a line. We share thoughts on how this image continues to be problematic for accurate communication.



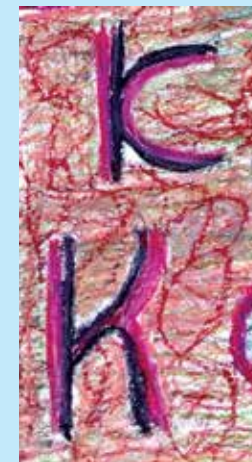
4

We then investigate the ideogram's development: its graphic twists and turns and gradual evolution from ideogram to phonogram (Proto-Sinaitic). We learn that the reduced head has become associated as a phoneme, with a sound derived from the first sound of the word *aluf*, namely, "Ah."



5

At last we welcome the Aleph's final form, pronunciation, and name. This is how it appears in Proto-Canaanite script.



6

We delight in its artful evolution and in the striking resemblance to its counterpart in modern Hebrew cursive script.



7

We complete this conversation by visiting the connections between the original Egyptian hieroglyphs and their Hebrew linguistic descendants: how a pictogram of a house, *bayit*, evolved into the letter *bet*—ב; how a drawing of water, *mayim*, became the letter *mem*—מ; or how a wide open eye, *ayin*, became the letter *ayin*—א.

The Elements of Creation in Grade 2

A COMPLEX CREATIVE PROCESS

BY JUDITH LEITNER

This article originally appeared in THINK #24, Spring 2020.

In Grade 2 we ask: What do we learn about creativity from the sequence of the days of creation and the connections between them? Which element of artistic practice does each day reveal? As artists, how might we emulate God's creative process?

To answer, we wonder what the beginning of an idea looks and feels like—how does it emerge and unfold. We think of God as an artist “just like us” and we set out to navigate the six days of God's creative process. We start with a large blank canvas and assume the mindset of artists illuminating a biblical text. Slowly and thoughtfully, we construct our vision. We layer day upon day, adding the new “elements” that are created for each.

We see that the practice of self-reflection appears as an important aspect of creative work; the words of the Torah describe what is being created but also reference thinking about process and technique. When the work of art is complete, God stands back to observe and reflect: “And God saw all that God had crafted, and behold, it was very good! And thus there was evening and there was morning—the sixth day” (Genesis 1:31).

As they reflect and plan, the children learn first to differentiate concepts from physical objects. They notice the use of light as both abstract and concrete; it is abstract when it divides “light” from “darkness” and concrete when it organizes the flow of time, dividing day from night, defining seasons and years. God says, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate day from night; they shall serve as signs for the set times—the days and years” (Genesis 1:14). The process of learning about distinctions includes the opportunity for students to see how an artist likes to classify and

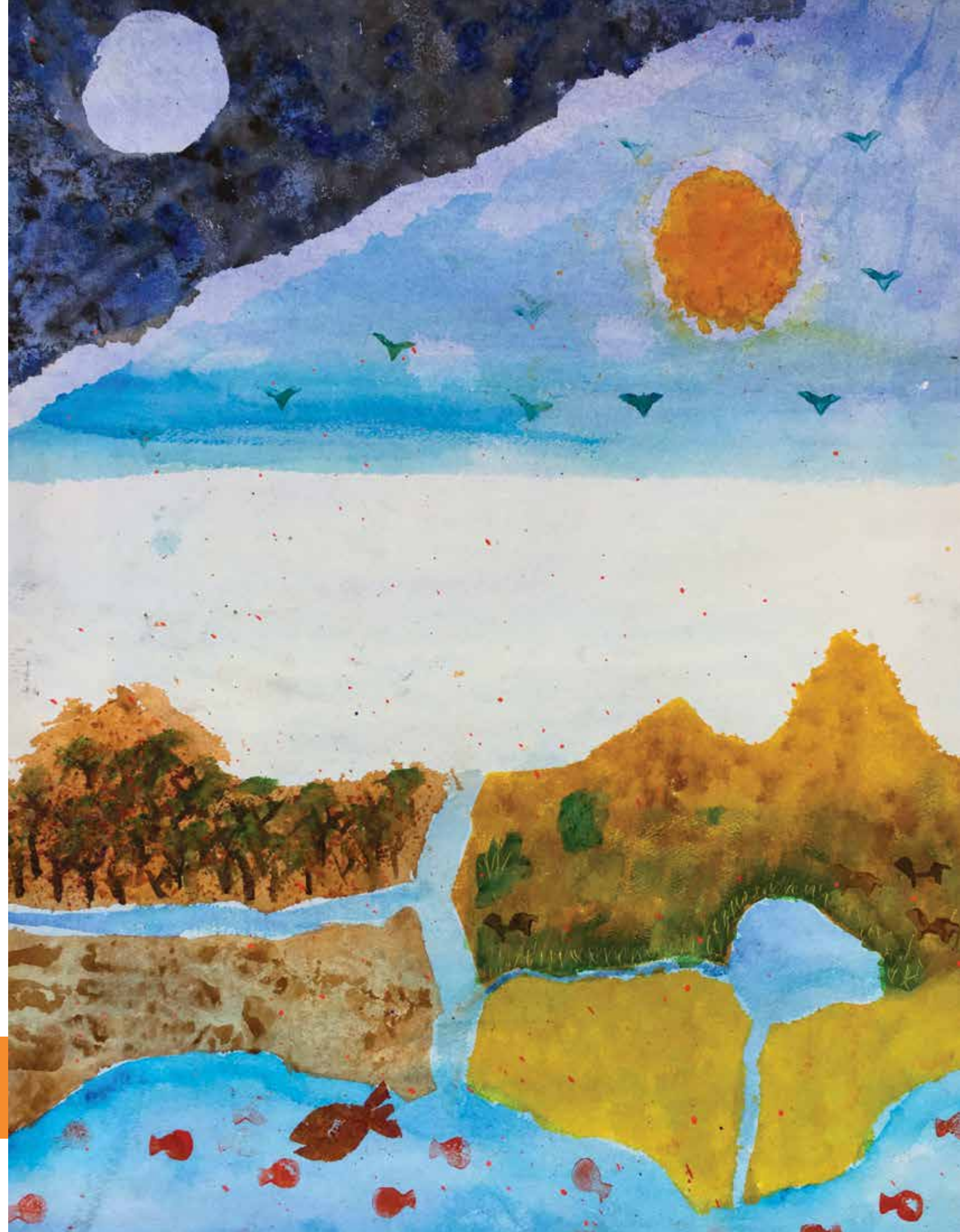
assign titles and names to work that has been accomplished; it is yet another way to make work one's own and communicate creative intention.

Creating art is always some kind of “self-portrait.” God declares, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Genesis 1:26). The creative process draws from what an artist knows, as well as what an artist observes.

As the days of creation follow on from one another, the students notice that creative ideas and designs instigate and perpetuate further ideas and designs. They see how creativity becomes a flow. Art begins with an empty space, a blank canvas, onto which ideas, materials, techniques, and working steps are envisioned. The artist builds the artwork step-by-step, in layers—imagining, exploring, crafting, standing back, reflecting, and fine-tuning. God makes artistic choices in a cumulative creative process over six days. Each day supports and makes the next step possible. First God makes an environment to hold all. The words of Genesis tell that the waters then brought forth swarms of creatures and birds; and that God commands the creatures and birds to increase their own numbers and fill the waters and the earth (Genesis 1:1–31).

The materials matter. Watercolour paint emphasizes the properties of water, an essential theme of the text. Students explore watercolour techniques that speak to those particular days. The paint colour can be diluted and shallow or deep and dark and each can imply a different message. Later, they use earth, otherwise known as ceramics, to create the first human from clay, as described by Genesis 2:7.

The following pages share the process the young artists pursue in mirroring creation as told by the Book of Genesis.



What do we learn about creativity from the sequence of the days and the connections between them?

Day 1

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ

When, at the beginning, as God was creating the heaven and the earth

וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תֵהוֹ וְנִבְהוּ וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם

the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אוֹר וַיְהִי־אוֹר

God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

וַיַּרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאוֹר כִּי־טוֹב וַיַּבְדֵּל אֱלֹהִים בֵּין הָאוֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ

God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. (Genesis 1:1–4)

ARTISTIC PROCESS: watercolour wash



Day 2

וַיַּעַשׂ אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הַרְקִיעַ וַיַּבְדֵּל בֵּין הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר מִתַּחַת לַרְקִיעַ וּבֵין

הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר מֵעַל לַרְקִיעַ וַיְהִי־כֵן

God made the expanse, and it separated the water which was below the expanse from the water which was above the expanse.

And it was so. (Genesis 1:7)

ARTISTIC PROCESS: graded watercolour wash

Day 3

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יִקְוּוּ הַמַּיִם מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם אֶל־מְקוֹם אֶחָד

וַתֵּרָאָה הַיַּבְשָׁה וַיְהִי־כֵן

God said, "Let the water below the sky be gathered into one area, that the dry land may appear." And it was so.

וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים | לַיַּבְשָׁה אָרֶץ וּלְמִקְוֵה הַמַּיִם קָרָא יַמִּים וַיַּרְא

אֱלֹהִים כִּי־טוֹב

God called the dry land Earth, and the gathering of waters He called Seas. And God saw that this was good.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים תְּדַשֵּׂא הָאָרֶץ דְּשֵׂא עֵשֶׂב מְזֵרִיעַ זֶרַע עֵץ פְּרִי

עֵשֶׂה פְּרִי לְמִינֹו אֲשֶׁר זֶרְעוּבוּ עַל־הָאָרֶץ וַיְהִי־כֵן

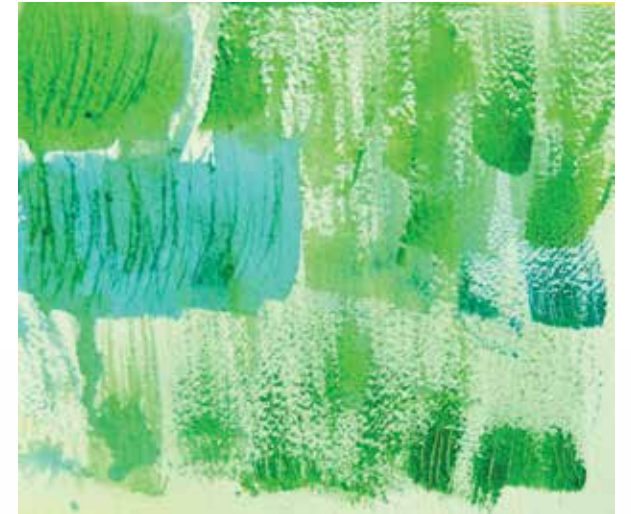
And God said, "Let the earth sprout vegetation: seed-bearing plants, fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." And it was so.

וַתוֹצֵא הָאָרֶץ דְּשֵׂא עֵשֶׂב מְזֵרִיעַ זֶרַע לְמִינֵהוּ וְעֵץ עֹשֶׂה־פְּרִי

אֲשֶׁר זֶרְעוּבוּ לְמִינֵהוּ וַיַּרְא אֱלֹהִים כִּי־טוֹב

The earth brought forth vegetation: seed-bearing plants of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. (Genesis 1:9–12)

ARTISTIC PROCESS: drawing, masking, stippling wet-on-wet, subtractive technique: saran wrap on wet canvas, etching, dry brushing



Day 4

וַיַּעַשׂ אֱלֹהִים אֶת-שְׁנֵי הַגְּדֹלִים אֶת-הַמְּאֹר הַגָּדֹל לְמַשְׁלַת הַיּוֹם וְאֶת-הַמְּאֹר הַקָּטָן לְמַשְׁלַת הַלַּיְלָה וְאֶת הַכּוֹכָבִים

God made the two great lights, the greater light to dominate the day and the lesser light to dominate the night, and the stars.

וַיִּתֵּן אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים בְּרָקִיעַ הַשָּׁמַיִם לְהָאִיר עַל-הָאָרֶץ
And God set them in the expanse of the sky to shine upon the earth,

וּלְמַשֵּׁל בַּיּוֹם וּבַלַּיְלָה וּלְהַבְדִּיל בֵּין הָאוֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ וַיַּרְא אֱלֹהִים כִּי-טוֹב

to dominate the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. (Genesis 1:16-18)

ARTISTIC PROCESS: drawing, masking, stippling wet-on-wet and wet-on-dry, salting



Day 5

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הַתַּיִמָּנוֹת הַגְּדֹלִים וְאֶת כָּל-נֶפֶשׁ הַחַיָּה | הַרְמֵשֶׁת אֲשֶׁר שָׂרְצוּ הַמַּיִם לְמִינֵיהֶם וְאֶת כָּל-עוֹף כְּנָף לְמִינֵיהוּ וַיַּרְא אֱלֹהִים כִּי-טוֹב

God created the great sea monsters, and all the living creatures of every kind that creep, which the waters brought forth in swarms, and all the winged birds of every kind. And God saw that this was good. (Genesis 1:21)

ARTISTIC PROCESS: stamping



Day 6

וַיַּעַשׂ אֱלֹהִים אֶת-חַיַּת הָאָרֶץ לְמִינָהּ וְאֶת-הַבְּהֵמָה לְמִינָהּ וְאֶת כָּל-רֶמֶשׂ הָאֲדָמָה לְמִינֵהוּ וַיַּרְא אֱלֹהִים כִּי-טוֹב

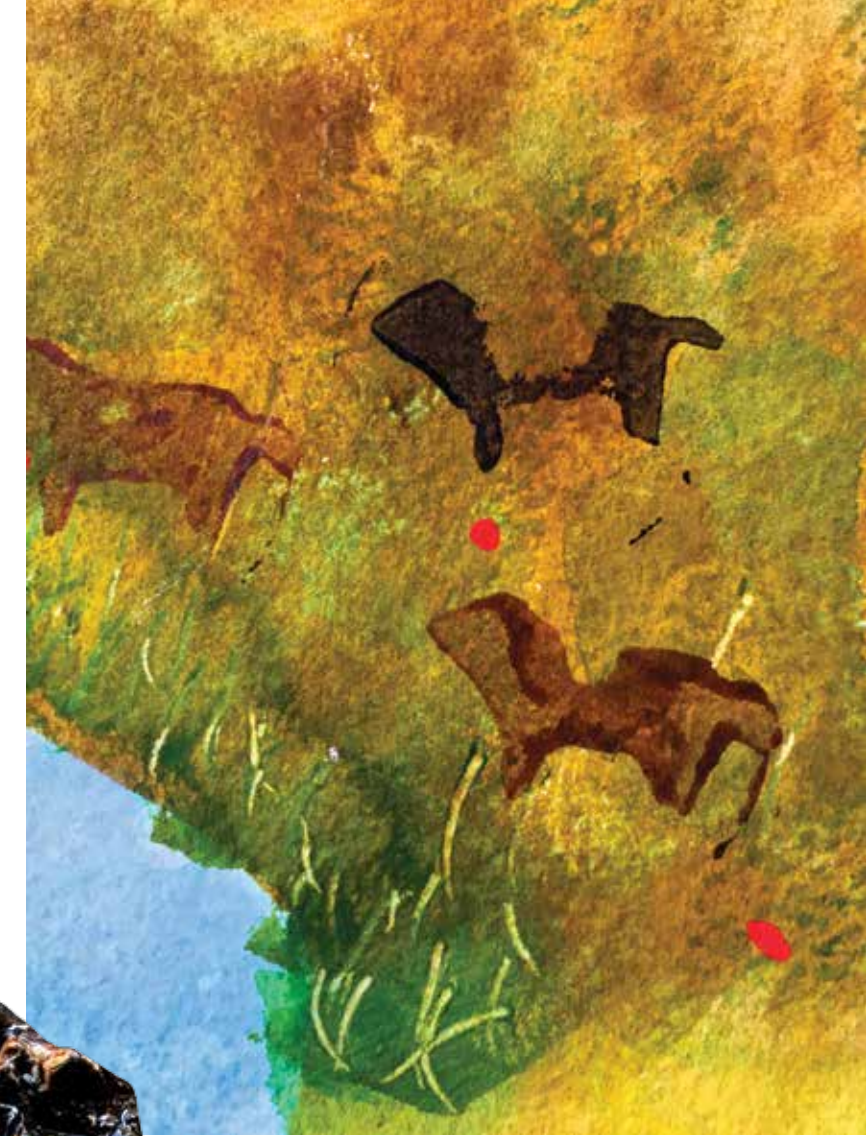
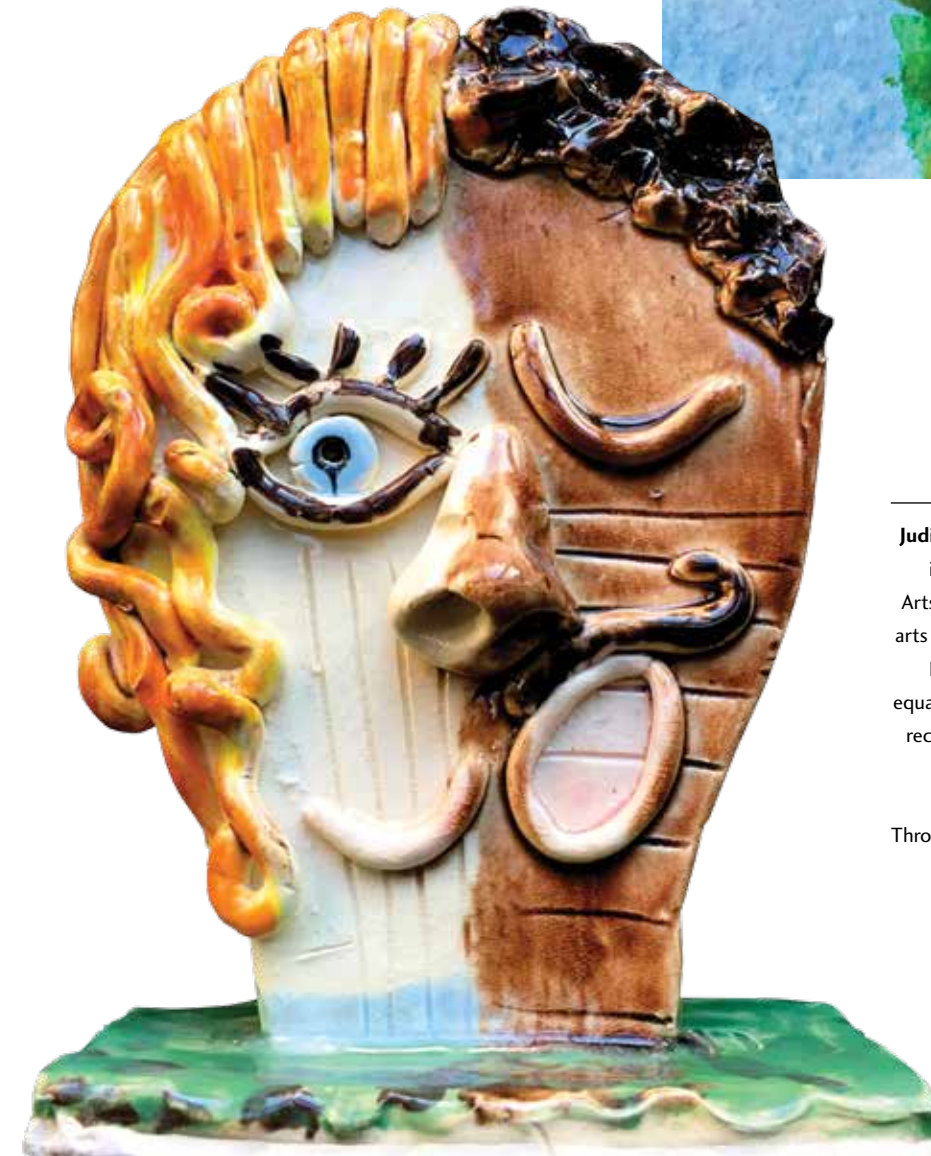
God made wild beasts of every kind and cattle of every kind, and all kinds of creeping things of the earth. And God saw that this was good. (Genesis 1:25)

ARTISTIC PROCESS: drawing and stamping

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים | אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם

And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. (Genesis 1:27)

ARTISTIC PROCESS: the art of ceramics: sculpting in low relief and glazing



Judith Leitner co-founded The Toronto Heschel School in 1996 and since then has served as the Director of Arts, team-designing and teaching the integrative Judaic arts curriculum. In 1991 she founded the Integrated Arts Programme at She'arim Hebrew Day School. Judith is equally passionate about documentary photography; her recent exhibitions include "Serene Passage: A Traveller's Prayer at Ground Zero, Madrid and Shanghai" (Arta Gallery, 2011 and Darchei Noam, 2014); "My Voice, Through My Lens" (MaRS Discovery District, June 2014), and "Embedded: Personal Identity through Job:19" (Contact Photography Festival, 2015).

Life Lessons and the Art of Portraiture

BY DANIEL ABRAMSON

This article originally appeared in THINK #16, Fall 2014.

Like many people, I have always been fascinated by old family photographs. I love looking at familiar faces in those black-and-white photos, trying to see myself. These images of mostly small moments, frozen in time, repeat their stories each time I look at them. Sometimes they joyfully reveal something new that I missed the last time I looked, and sometimes they quietly bring forward an ache of memory, with its persistent insistence of absence. The images are always meaningful, but each time I look, the meanings aren't always the same.

To anyone who has ever looked nostalgically at an old photo, it seems obvious to say that the way we find meaning in these images depends on the narratives and perspectives that we, the viewers, bring to an image at any given time. Consider though, the broader implications of that statement. If the meaning of an image is created inside the viewer, as something dynamic and transient, does the artist create anything meaningful? After all, isn't it the artist who is making a statement through the use of chosen artistic forms and materials?

Such complex questions about the "location" of meaning in art are among the most challenging and interesting questions that have been asked especially of drawings known to have first appeared on cave walls 60,000 years ago. These questions are the driving force behind the discourse of the postmodern era. At Toronto Heschel, we pose essential questions like these to our students and to ourselves as teachers. We ask students to consider these dilemmas as their understanding of a particular idea evolves.

Is artistic process essentially an inward looking reflective process or do artists look to create meaning through mimicry of outward forms? Reframed pedagogically, should we ask students to paint what they feel or what they see? As is often the case in matters of the postmodern, the answer is... it depends.

What makes us look different from one another? Do these differences matter? What is common in every face? How are we all like one another?



In Senior Kindergarten, there is significant value in teaching students to start their lives as artists by painting what they see. The young students learn to draw their own faces as they look carefully at their reflections in small mirrors. Examining their faces closely, they learn formal design elements such as line, colour, texture, shape, symmetry, and scale. They also learn about expression and meaning, as they observe how subtle changes in outward facial expressions speak about their inner feelings.

Even at a young age, drawing the face raises telling questions about difference. What makes us look different from one another? Do these differences matter? What is common in every face? How are we all like one another?

We approach these early questions with artistic practices that are "outward looking"; the artist looks out into the world and observes, records, and communicates what he/she sees. These foundational explorations give the children important tools for decoding complex non-verbal cues as they take their first steps to become empathetic, understanding observers of the world.

Much as our own thoughts and feelings about old photographs change as time passes, our pedagogical approaches to portraiture evolve as our students progress through their years at Heschel. In Grade 8, students study the "rise of the individual" and wonder about the motives and meaning behind great works of art, such as Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, a painting famously obtuse in its subject's outward expression. Students also study important human rights activists and create portraits of them, which gives them a chance to wonder what is going on behind their eyes, too.

The students also draw self-portraits and compare their images to those of the human rights activists they have painted. The focus of this exercise is on the elements of artistic practice that are inward looking and reflective. The juxtaposition of the students' own faces and the faces of the well-known changemakers invites questions to go deeper than the external observation and mimicry of outward appearances. When we ask students to wonder about the similarities and differences between themselves and the activists, we are not asking about physical traits. Rather, we are

nudging our students to look beyond the image and see the human attributes that may have compelled these activists to act with such conviction and passion.

The amazing thing about portraiture as an art form is that, at its best, it is simultaneously a celebration of the uniqueness of its subject and an obliteration of the notion of individuality. Portraits are thought-provoking. They open up interesting areas of ambiguity, and they pose tough questions about difference and sameness.

These very questions are so important for students in early adolescence. As they come of age in our tradition, they are already working through the subtle process of figuring out who they want to be. At Toronto Heschel, we integrate this kind of important generative and expansive theme across the curriculum. In language arts class, students address the theme of individuality through literary character studies; in science, they study the reason and timelines for the emergence of human diversity; and, in art class, they use portraits.

At the end of it all, we wonder...does the art of the portrait help us to see the uniqueness of each person, or does it allow us to recognize what is common to us all? As with other challenging questions, we find compelling answers in Jewish texts. In this passage from the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin 38a, students are taught to consider the wonder of diversity:

When a coin maker mints many coins from one mold, they are all alike. Their identical appearance makes their value equal. In comparison, when God fashioned all people from the one mold of the first person, not one resembles the other, yet all have the same value.

When we look carefully at each other, when we notice and accept each other's differences on the outside, then we can strive to see the common worth on the inside. This is what we encourage from Senior Kindergarten through Grade 8.

Daniel Abramson is an artist, photographer, and teacher. At the Toronto Heschel School he taught in the junior high from 2010–17.



“I would say to young people...and above all, remember that the meaning of life is to live life as if it were a work of art.”

—Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

(from Rav Heschel's final interview with NBC journalist Carl Stern, 1972)

The Toronto
Heschel School



בית הספר
על שם השל