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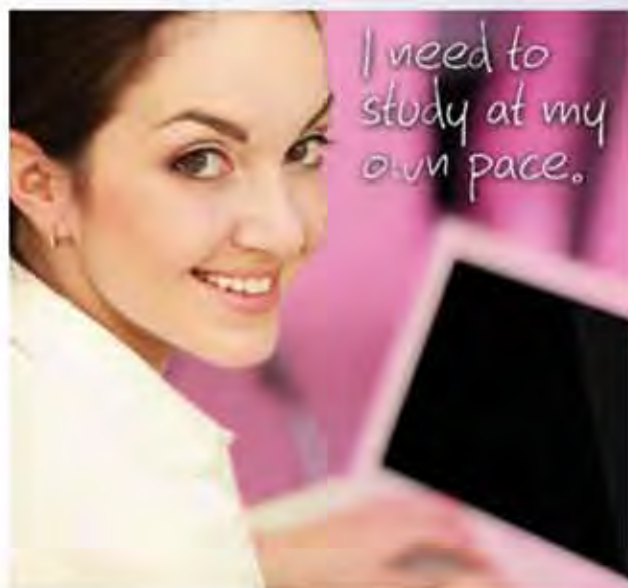
# הידיעון

## HAYIDION

RAVSAK

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JEWISH LITERACY AND CURRICULUM



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## LITERACY

### REDEEMING JEWISH LITERACY

12

Some notion of cultural literacy—what we think our students should know—informs our curriculum and assessment. Levisohn argues that we should teach toward the goal of use more than knowledge.



**Dr. Jon A. Levisohn** is Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Chair in Jewish Educational Thought at Brandeis University. [levisohn@brandeis.edu](mailto:levisohn@brandeis.edu)

### SETTING THE BAR HIGH FOR JEWISH LEARNING

14

Achieving the ambitious goals that day schools set in Jewish creativity requires serious investment in Jewish learning. A current initiative is creating standards and benchmarks for day school curricula in Judaic studies.



**Lisa Exler** is director of the Curriculum Project, a joint initiative of Mechon Hadar and Beit Rabban Day School, where she is the director of Jewish studies. [exler@mechonhadar.org](mailto:exler@mechonhadar.org)

### BETWEEN UNIVERSALISM AND PARTICULARISM: RETHINKING THE TEACHING OF JEWISH HISTORY

17

A day school's vision of literacy should encompass a mission of balancing universalism and particularism. Teaching American Jewish history can help to accomplish that goal.



**Dr. Jonathan Krasner** is the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Associate Professor of Jewish Education Research at Brandeis University. [jkrasner@brandeis.edu](mailto:jkrasner@brandeis.edu)

### RAMBAM'S MODEL OF JEWISH LITERACY

20

Maimonides' statements about curriculum show the degree of creativity and flexibility that existed within a traditional milieu, and a striking responsiveness to contemporary thought in his time.



**Rabbi Yehuda Rapoport** is Judaic studies curriculum director and teacher at the Seattle Hebrew Academy. [yrapoport@sha613.org](mailto:yrapoport@sha613.org)

### TANAKH LITERACY, FOR THE JEWISH PRESENT

22

The stories of Tanakh can serve as a framework for learning and life, providing both meaning and values in a way that speaks to students' search for relevance.



**Rabbi Dr. Rafi Cashman** is the branch and Judaic studies principal at the Associated Hebrew School's Danilack Middle School campus in Toronto, where he is deeply engaged in teacher development, curriculum visioning and implementation, and system change.

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### JEWISH FLUENCY: CREATING A NEW CULTURE

24

Hillel has created an assessment to measure employee "fluency," the ability to articulate Jewish concepts in ways that are authentic and relevant to college students.



**Abi Dauber Sterne** is vice president for Jewish education and director of the Meyerhoff Center for Jewish Experience at Hillel International. [asterne@hillel.org](mailto:asterne@hillel.org)

### ROOM TO BREATHE: CREATING AIR IN PLURALISTIC JEWISH EDUCATION

28

Jewish study provides a valuable model and forum for pluralistic education, in which meaning is created through the process of learning and dialogue.



**Rabbi Eliezer Sneiderman** is dean of Jewish studies at the American Hebrew Academy in Greensboro, North Carolina, and a doctoral student in the Gratz EdD program. [esneiderman@aha-net.org](mailto:esneiderman@aha-net.org)

## RAVSAK NEWS & PROGRAMS

### TECHNION JEWISH DAY SCHOOL CHALLENGE

11

### RESHET ROUNDUP

19

### HoSPEP MIDYEAR CONFERENCE REVIEW

29

### RAVSAK HEBREW BADGE PROJECT

31

### KESHET TRAINS METRO NEW YORK CITY JEWISH DAY-SCHOOL LEADERS IN LGBT INCLUSION

53

### 2016/5776 HEBREW POETRY CONTEST WINNERS

68

## COVER



The cover image is inspired by a picture of the Technion Nanobible, the world's smallest Hebrew Bible etched on a microchip the size of a grain of sugar. It shows a laser inscribing the first word of Tanakh, Bereishit.

## COLUMNS

### FROM THE EDITOR

7

#### Jewish Literacy: Mi Yode'a?



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### FROM THE BOARD

8

#### Working Together for a Bright Future



**Rebekah Farber** is the chair of RAVSAK's Board of Directors.

### DEAR COOKI

10

#### Navigating Critical Relationships



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### GOOD & WELFARE: NEWS FROM RAVSAK SCHOOLS

11

### COLUMN

38

#### Embracing the Practical



**Dr. Miriam Heller Stern** is the dean of American Jewish University's (AJU) Graduate Center for Education in Los Angeles.  
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### FROM THE CO-EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

82

#### Literacy: The Gift of Many Things



**Dr. Idana Goldberg** is the Co-Executive Director of RAVSAK.  
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### WHAT STICKS

30

From a school's perspective, literacy is an aspiration teachers seek to impart. Here, four alumni reflect on what they have taken with them, the school's gift that keeps on giving.



**Emma Maier**, Milken Community High School, Los Angeles, Class of 2014. **Aaron Friedland**, King David High School, Vancouver, Class of 2010. **Emily Goldberg**, Abraham Joshua Heschel School, New York, Class of 2014. **Meredith Leon**, Bernard Zell Anshe Emet Day School, Chicago, Class of 2011.

### JEWISH LITERACY VERSUS JEWISH IDENTITY: TEACHERS' REFLECTIONS

34

Day school teachers are tasked to transmit Jewish literacy to students. How do they conceive of this task? Is literacy a means to identity, or an end in itself?



**Dr. Sarah Levy** has been involved in the field of Jewish education for 15 years and is currently working with the Colorado Agency for Jewish Education.  
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### TRANSLATION: A LIVING CONVERSATION

36

#### Interview with Aviya Kushner



**Aviya Kushner** is the author of *The Grammar of God: A Journey Into the Words and Worlds of the Bible*. This interview is published in partnership with the Jewish Book Council.

## LITERACY IN OUR SCHOOLS

### To Learn to Teach

39

**Brian King**, Director of Innovation, Milwaukee Jewish Day School

### Mikvah: A J-STEM Project

41

**Rabbi Howard Finkelstein**, Dean of Judaic Studies, Ottawa Jewish Community School

### Jewish Mysticism

41

**Catherine Lasser**, Judaics Studies Teacher, Golda Och Academy, West Orange, New Jersey

### A New Mode of Learning: Scribal Arts

42

**Rabbi Reuven Margrett**, Director of Jewish Studies, Frankel Jewish Academy, West Bloomfield, Michigan



### What's in a Namesake? Putting the "Heschel" Back in Heschel Day School

43

**Rabbi Scott Westle**, Rabbi-in-Residence, Abraham Joshua Heschel Day School, Northridge, California

## CURRICULUM

### A JEWISH LITERACY PROGRAM: SATISFYING OUR INVESTORS

44

Conceiving of a school's function as satisfying parents' investment in Jewish education requires unifying a school's curriculum around explicit goals for Jewish literacy.



**Steve Bailey PhD** is a Jewish educator, curriculum developer and author ([www.thebiblicalvoice.com](http://www.thebiblicalvoice.com)), who successfully implemented a literacy curriculum in a K-12 community day school of 2000 students in Sydney, Australia.  
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### FROM MULTIPLE CHOICE TO MULTIPLE CHOICES: RETHINKING ISRAEL LITERACY IN OUR SCHOOLS

46

What does it take to understand Israel? A shift in thinking leads to a change in curriculum and assessment.



**Sivan Zakai PhD** is assistant professor of education at American Jewish University and an affiliated scholar of the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University. She directs the AJU Teaching Israel Fellowship (AJU) and the Children's Learning About Israel Project (Brandeis).

## JEWISH LITERATURE AND LITERACY

48

The literature shelves of the Jewish library are often the first dispensed with in a day school curriculum. Lambert argues for their importance in bringing the issues and conflicts of Jewish existence to life.



**Josh Lambert** is academic director of the Yiddish Book Center, where he directs the Great Jewish Books Summer Program for teenagers, the Great Jewish Books Teacher Workshop, and a newly launched website with resources to help teachers introduce modern Jewish

literature into their classrooms, [www.teachgreatjewishbooks.org](http://www.teachgreatjewishbooks.org). He is visiting professor of English at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, author of two books on American Jewish literature, and a contributing editor to Tablet. [jlambert@yiddishbookcenter.org](mailto:jlambert@yiddishbookcenter.org)

## HEBREW LITERACY: PASSPORT AND LYNCHPIN

52

Given the diversity of beliefs and practices among Jews, a focus on excellence in Hebrew education gives students the most valuable tool for their own Jewish journey.



**Rabbi Elie Kaunfer** is co-founder and executive director at Mechon Hadar, and a member of the council for Hebrew Language and Culture in North America. [kaunfer@mechonhadar.org](mailto:kaunfer@mechonhadar.org)

## STAYING ALIVE: EMBRACING CURRICULAR CHANGE AND COLLABORATION

54



The most important aspect of teaching is vitality, keeping the material fresh for teacher and student. Two proposals for teacher collaboration take aim at this challenge.



**Barbara Ellison Rosenblit**, a humanities and Jewish studies teacher and dean of faculty mentoring at the Weber School in Atlanta, received the Covenant Award in 2004. [Brosenblit@weberschool.org](mailto:Brosenblit@weberschool.org)

## THE DAY SCHOOL LIBRARY: VITAL LINK BETWEEN INFORMATION AND THE CLASSROOM

56

Once upon a time, the school library was a Temple of Jewish literacy. Adler argues that the library's importance remains even as the librarian's function has changed.



**Aviva Adler** is a librarian at North Shore Hebrew Academy High School in Great Neck, New York. [aviva28@gmail.com](mailto:aviva28@gmail.com)

## JEWISH SOURCES AS A GUIDE TO CURRICULUM AND PEDAGOGY

58

Jewish sources can serve as much more than content for study in Judaics classes. They provide a framework for living, and have the power to guide all day school teachers in their work as educators.



**Hagit Dotan** writes curricula in Tzav Pius for joint religious-secular education and is a facilitator in the Beit Midrash for Parents in joint schools. [dotanh@013.net](mailto:dotanh@013.net)

## ONLINE CURRICULA: LITERACY WITH FLEXIBILITY

60

The advantage of online curricula that are well constructed include empowering students to learn at their own pace and options for multiple learning pathways.



**Ilana Lipman** is the director of curriculum development at the Lookstein Virtual Jewish Academy, designed to bring quality online Jewish education to Jewish students everywhere ([virtualjewishacademy.org](http://virtualjewishacademy.org)).

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## PLANNING THE UNPLANNABLE: WHEN LIFE INTERRUPTS THE CURRICULUM

62

What do educators do when tragic real-world events impinge upon topics being studied in the classroom? Discover three strategies that were discussed in this year's JCAT program.



**Dr. Deborah Skolnick Einhorn** is assistant dean for academic development and advising and assistant professor of Jewish education at Hebrew College in Newton, Massachusetts. Deborah appreciates the thought partnership of Dr. Miriam

Raider-Roth in the early stages of this article, and of all her JCAT colleagues throughout the program.

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## LITERACY DAY

64

Taking a day to step out of the usual curriculum and celebrate Jewish literacy offers students an opportunity to explore new subjects, sharpen their skills and stoke their passions.



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## THINKING JEWISHLY: THE ROLE OF STUDENT PROGRAMS IN A JUDAICS CURRICULUM

66

Kutler believes there is a cognitive goal of Jewish studies, shaping the way students approach issues and understand the world. His school uses RAVSAK's programs JCAT and Moot Beit Din as curricular vehicles toward that goal.



**Dr. Larry Kutler** is head of school at Talmud Torah/Herzliah (K-11) in Montreal. [lkutler@utt.qc.ca](mailto:lkutler@utt.qc.ca)



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**The views expressed in this journal do not necessarily reflect the positions of RAVSAK.**

**RAVSAK would like to thank our associate members:**





BARBARA DAVIS

# JEWISH LITERACY: MI YODE'A?

In Spanish, the word for “illiterate” is *analfabeto*—one who does not have an alphabet. Yet having an alphabet does not make a Jewish person literate, as can be attested to by thousands of Jewish teens and adults who know the *alefbet* but not much else. What makes a person literate in a Jewish sense?

About twenty-five years ago, Rabbi Joseph Telushkin wrote his book *Jewish Literacy* because, he said, “At a time when Jewish life in the United States is flourishing, Jewish ignorance is too. Tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of teenage and adult Jews are seeking Jewish involvements—even Jewish leadership positions—all the while hoping no one will find out their unhappy little secret: *They are Jewishly illiterate*. The most basic terms in Judaism, the most significant facts in Jewish history and contemporary Jewish life, are either vaguely familiar or unknown to most modern Jews.”

Are things today any different? Did Rabbi Telushkin’s book make a difference? What, if anything, *would* make a difference? What does it mean to be “Jewishly literate” anyway? And who gets to decide? The answers to some of these questions can be found in the pages of this issue of *HaYidion*, but I thought it might be interesting to survey my own hometown to see how the rabbis there (a diverse group by age and denomination) would define Jewish literacy and assess its current state. The results were revealing—and the rabbis were asked to keep their answers short!

Rabbi Paul Drazen, who heads a large Conservative congregation, defined literacy as “familiarity with standard ritual objects and “ability to participate in or lead [depending if home or synagogue] basic Jewish rituals, such as major worship services, Shabbat/holiday home rituals.” Rabbi Evan Shore, who leads a Modern Orthodox shul, defined literacy succinctly: “Jewish literacy: the ability to navigate the five Books of Moses, basic Jewish texts and the prayer book.”

Rabbi Leah Fein, of the university Hillel, believes that “someone who is Jewishly literate is a person who lives her life in tune with the Jewish calendar, who makes decisions (about food, lifestyle, giving, etc.) based on Jewish values and mitzvot, who can read (and maybe even speak) Hebrew, who can actively participate in services, and who knows stories, history and core texts of our people.” For Rabbi Andrew Pepperstone, leader of a Conservative congregation, Jewish literacy “is a constellation of Jewish skills, knowledge, and understandings, including how to fully live the Jewish sacred time, both the annual festival calendar and the Jewish lifecycle, how to learn and teach Torah (broadly defined), how to engage in Jewish prayer, and how to make the world a better place.”

But none of the rabbis was especially upbeat about the current state of Jewish literacy. Rabbi Pepperstone said, “I have major concerns about the current state of Jewish literacy across the Jewish world, not only in this or that movement. I fear that the lack of core Jewish literacy as I see it is leading to a lack of cohesion in the Jewish world and a widespread lack of understanding about what it means to be Jewish in the world today.” Rabbi Drazen likewise believes that “we are losing ground. For far too many people, basic familiarity is no longer the case—which makes for a steeper learning curve at school.” Rabbi Shore summed it up thus: “The state of literacy for the majority of Jews is sadly lacking substance and meaning.”

Rabbi Fein, the youngest of the rabbis, did, however, offer a hopeful perspective: “I think it is difficult to make a generalized assessment of Jewish literacy in the US today just because it’s such a large spectrum,” she wrote. “Of course, there is always room to grow, no matter what a person’s background and Jewish education is. But I think to be Jewishly literate is also to understand and view oneself as part of a conversation and legacy of Jewish literacy. Judaism is a religion and a culture of lifelong learning and a recognition that there is always more to learn and more room to grow... and another generation to pass the wisdom of our tradition onto.”

We hope that the insights you gain from the rabbis of my community and the authors in this issue will enhance your own Jewish literacy and that of the learners in your school communities.

# WORKING TOGETHER FOR A BRIGHT FUTURE



REBEKAH FARBER

It has been an honor to serve as the chair of RAVSAK's Board of Trustees for almost three years now. Our board is a trusted and trustworthy group of individuals, cultivated to provide expertise in many areas of Jewish day school leadership, finance, law, organizational behavior and good common sense. I have learned so much from each of my colleagues on the board, mostly about their steadfast resolve to put the needs of our constituent schools as the north star of our work. It is with that resolve that our board made the important decision for RAVSAK to join with the four other national day school organizations with which we have long collaborated to consolidate our efforts into a new central national organization.

A lot of energy went into our decision to create a consolidated effort that could represent the many and diverse values of a Jewish day school education and could strengthen its potential for the future. This was one of the most formidable tasks our board has ever undertaken, and every conversation was framed by the question, "What will best serve our schools?" The board deliberated for over a year; we wrestled, we debated, we weighed. We studied focus groups, survey results and data, and consistently reflected on how to meet the needs of our constituent schools both now and in the future. Momentous decisions often contain within them leaps of faith, and the RAVSAK board is taking this leap and taking this risk because of our belief in the potential of this new consolidated organization.

I and the entire board are incredibly proud of everything that RAVSAK has accomplished on behalf of Jewish community day schools and the field. The work we do and the care we take (and hope you have felt) has always been done to strengthen the Jewish mission of schools, build Jewish leaders, provoke thoughtful conversation and elevate and enrich creative Jewish education. Every accomplishment, from our grassroots days to our most recent field-building successes, has been achieved with the needs of the schools foremost in our minds.

We know that for some of our member schools, there may be some uncertainty about how you will be served in the future. Rest assured that the board and staff of RAVSAK will continue to influence the shape and substance of the many services and programs that the new organization will provide. The new organization will continue to create and support the leadership and the learners at community day schools worldwide. In fact, some of our best programs are slated to continue under the new umbrella. We invite you all to share your ideas and get involved with the new organization once it opens its doors to the field later this year.

We have loved our partnership with you, and have kvelled like proud parents at your many victories, large and small. Please know that we continue to support the holy work that you do and wish you all much mazal as you grow and evolve within your respective communities.

Please know that a great deal of work remains to be done in order for the new organization to become a reality and that our board and staff are working diligently to making that happen. Until then, let us hear from you. Continue to share and learn from each other in our Reshet groups. Call the RAVSAK office and let us know what is important to you.

We look forward to your continued partnership during this transition.

On behalf of the entire board of RAVSAK, I send gratitude for your trust and look forward to the future successes of your schools and our field.

Beshalom,

Rebekah



# DEAR FRIENDS AND COLLEAGUES,

Mazal Tov!

We are delighted to announce that Day Schools of Reform Judaism (PARDES), The Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education (PEJE), RAVSAK (The Jewish Community Day School Network), the Schechter Day School Network (Schechter), and the Yeshiva University School Partnership (YUSP) have all agreed to move forward towards the formation of a new, integrated North American Jewish day school organization.

And, thank you!

Thank you for your patience during the planning process. Thank you for participating in the focus groups and surveys and one-on-one-conversations. Your feedback and overwhelming support for the concept of a new integrated organization is why we are at this point. Thank you for your best thinking and experience; it has all helped to shape and guide our work. We cannot adequately express our appreciation.

The decision by our respective leadership to move in this direction is an affirmation of the centrality of day schools in Jewish life and reflects our dedication to seeing Jewish learning, literacy, culture and commitment flourish in a rapidly changing world. At the same time, it reflects the conviction of many in the day school community that we can all benefit from the knowledge, expertise and ideas of others, even if we express our Jewishness differently. As one organization, we can unify to strengthen day schools, the core of the Jewish educational enterprise.

This new organization, which we are calling NewOrg until we finalize its name, is committed to supporting and enabling financial vitality and educational excellence in Jewish day schools, and to building and strengthening a vibrant, visible and connected Jewish day school field. By pooling the talent, expertise and resources that have been dispersed among our organizations, NewOrg will be able to offer an expanded set of programs, services and networking opportunities to benefit the more than 375 schools and close to 100,000 students one or more of us already serve, and any other schools interested in participating. In short, we are confident that NewOrg will be greater than the sum of its parts. We hope you share our enthusiasm.

Each of our five organizations plays a unique role with the schools we serve, and we are building NewOrg to do that and so much more. NewOrg will maintain and expand on stream-specific offerings, while scaling and developing field-wide programs; it will offer the small network feel, but with the benefits of leveraged resources and expertise. NewOrg will take the best of what each of our organization has to offer its schools, and then innovate and scale it for all schools interested in participating.

It will network colleagues and schools of different ideologies and geographies to address shared challenges and capitalize on shared opportunities, while still providing distinct services and counsel to schools from within similar streams. NewOrg will advocate for all day schools. It will convene professional leaders, lay leaders and donors to advance the field, and bring in more resources. And, NewOrg will wield its extensive organizational reach and influence and bring it to bear on behalf of the needs of individual day schools.

We are grateful for AVI CHAI's pledge of support to our new organization and look forward to partnering with other generous philanthropists – institutions and individuals – who are dedicated to building strength, excellence and vitality in Jewish day schools. A feasibility study we conducted as part of the planning process indicates potential for significant philanthropic investment in NewOrg.

We have initiated a global search for a Chief Executive Officer to lead the new organization and have engaged DRG, a leading executive search firm for the non-profit sector, to assist us. The initial board of directors of the new organization will be composed of one lay leader from each of the founding organizations, as well as from AVI CHAI. A large group of lay-leaders and donors have expressed interest in supporting and being engaged with the organization and will form the pool from which additional board members will be drawn. We have also begun a branding process to select the new organization's name and develop an identity that reflects a unified, cooperative and fresh vision for the Jewish day school field.

We expect the new organization to launch, subject to the finalization of the formal agreement and necessary state approval, in Summer 2016.

Until then, the five founding organizations will continue to offer their affiliated schools the same services as before. While there will be a transition, our intention is to keep it as seamless as possible. Please be in touch with the executive director of your affiliated organizations with any questions. You can find additional information and updates at [www.newjdsorg.org](http://www.newjdsorg.org).

As always, we value and thank you for your partnership.

Sincerely,

The Planning Team

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DEAR COOKI accepts questions from all school stakeholders. To submit a question, write to [hayidion@ravsak.org](mailto:hayidion@ravsak.org), with "Dear Cooki" in the subject line.



COOKI LEVY

# NAVIGATING CRITICAL RELATIONSHIPS

I know how critical the relationship between the head of school and the board chair is to the success of the school. I have not yet been able to create this kind of positive and respectful relationship. Are there tried-and-true actions that build good relationships between the lay and professional leaders of the school?

At the recent convening of the participants in three cohorts of the RAVSAK Head of School Professional Excellence Project (HoSPEP), this was one of two overriding themes that dominated our discussions (the other was increasing enrollment). In response to your question, I am proud to share the wisdom of those who participated in the conference and offer, in their names, some ideas that work. So this column should really be called "Ask HoSPEP."

**Put in the hard work that creates good relationships.** As you begin your partnership with a new board chair, take the time to get to know him/her. Have breakfast or lunch or coffee together, and get to know each other as two people with common interests. Lay a foundation for the more difficult conversations by engaging in the easy conversations first. Share some personal tidbits and allow yourself to be seen as a "real person." Work at seeing your board chair in the same way.

**Believe that the board chair is your partner.** As true partners must, talk together about your common goals for the school, about the issues you feel are critical to success, and about your vision for Jewish day school education. Be sure you share the big picture before delving into smaller issues. They will be easier to resolve if you know that you both have the same goals in mind.

**Teach the board their role and yours.** Boards who do not understand what they should and should not do, who do not understand how their work complements yours and how they can best support you cannot possibly serve you well. Work with your board chair to ensure that roles are clearly understood; invite an outside person to work with your school or use the literature on the subject that is designed to help boards function well (NAIS has an excellent Trustee Handbook). Most board chairs really do NOT want to do your job.

**Create a framework for your work together.** Establish clear routines. Plan to meet together in person on a regular basis. Walk through the school together. Agree on the best time for phone calls. Set the board calendar together and work together on the agenda for each upcoming meeting. Make your work with the board chair a planned and important part of your job, not an unpleasant or inconvenient "add-on." Hash out your differences in private, and present a united front before the parents, the staff and the board.

**Be generous with information.** The board chair will receive myriad phone calls from parents, and sometimes from staff. S/he may be besieged in the grocery store or the synagogue with tales of incidents that occurred at school. It is your job to make sure that the board chair is never blindsided. With the understanding that your conversations with the board chair are strictly confidential in nature, be sure that s/he has a clear picture of what is happening in school. When anything out of the ordinary occurs, even if you have it completely under control, even if it is not at all the responsibility of the board to intervene, make sure your board chair has all the facts.

**Be transparent and authentic.** Never hide things, even the most unpleasant ones, from your board chair. Be open and honest, even if you have erred or a problem is brewing. Trust is the key to positive and productive relationships; never give your board chair reason to doubt your word. Always be ready to explain your reasons for taking the action that you have—not to defend yourself, but to help the board chair to learn, understand and grow.

**Do meaningful things together.** Spending time in a joint activity can reap many benefits. Agree to visit another school together; attend a workshop or conference together; read the same book in a mini-book club. Even better: invite your entire board to read and discuss an article or book.

**Listen, listen, listen.** It is so tempting to talk, to explain, to just do it. The more effective route is to listen. Make every effort to understand what is important to your board chair, how s/he feels on certain key issues and wishes to move forward, what inspires her, what scares him.

**Make your board chair "look good."** As successful as your board chair is in her professional life, chairing your school's board of directors may be a daunting task. She may worry that failure to do well at this task will impact her professional life and her social status. Help him navigate these new waters; be the educator that you inherently are, and teach him what he needs to know in order to do a good job.

## Good & Welfare

Jerry D. Isaak-Shapiro, head of school at **Joseph and Florence Mandel Jewish Day School** (formerly Agnon) in Beachwood, Ohio, was honored at an event sponsored by the *Cleveland Jewish News* naming 36 members of the community as Difference Makers.

Five Florida Jewish day schools, **Donna Klein Jewish Academy**, **Hillel Day School of Boca Raton**, **Torah Academy of Boca Raton**, **Yeshiva High School** and **Yeshiva Tiferes Torah**, are making a strong effort to enhance teacher training in specialized education; RAVSAK is happy to be part of this great work, in partnership with Hidden Sparks and Center for Initiatives in Jewish Education - CIJE.

Member school **Paul Penna Downtown Jewish Day School** in Toronto will sponsor Syrian refugees—an incredible act of humanity, embrace of tikkun olam, and opportunity to teach students about current events and day school values. Dr. Dan Goldberg, head of school, notes, “A primary focus of our school is social justice. We emphasize community and diversity, and a sense of responsibility toward the world.”

Congratulations to **Yavneh Day School** in Los Gatos, CA, on being highlighted by the White House for their menorah submission, the Religious Freedom menorah, which serve as a reminder of the privilege and responsibility of being a Jew and an American.

Birmingham, Alabama’s **N.E. Miles Jewish Day School** 6th grade “Trouble-shooting Gobblefloops” team won the state championship in the Wonder League Robotics competition.

Jamie Gomer of the **Abraham Joshua Heschel School** in Northridge, CA, and Kelly Shepard from **Milken Community Schools** in Los Angeles received the Jewish Educator Award at the BJE of Los Angeles’ 26th Annual Jewish Educator Awards luncheon.

Sheryl Primakow has been appointed head of school at **Milwaukee Jewish Day School**, and Brian King is now the school’s director of innovation.

Lisa Feldman, head of school at **Weizmann Day School** in Pasadena, CA, has been honored as the Jewish professional of the year by the Federation of Greater San Gabriel and Pomona Valleys.

**Carmel Academy**’s E2K team was awarded second place in a national STEM competition for gifted math and science students.

Mazal Tov to Rabbi Aaron Frank, incoming head of school at **Kinneret Day School** in the Bronx.

## Technion Jewish Day School Challenge



For the first time, the Technion—Israel Institute of Technology and RAVSAK are partnering on a contest designed to encourage Jewish day school students to integrate their creative problem-solving skills and Jewish knowledge. Teams of middle and high school students from Jewish day schools around the world are invited to create Pesach-themed Rube Goldberg machines that complete the task of revealing a seder plate. A Rube Goldberg machine, named after cartoonist and inventor Rube Goldberg, is a multistep chain reaction machine that is intentionally over-engineered to complete a simple task. This contest is inspired by the Pesach Rube Goldberg machine created by Technion students last year, the video of which went viral. This challenge puts a spotlight on the teamwork and innovation that Jewish day schools foster—values that the Technion champions through research and scholarship.

A panel of judges, including Technion president Peretz Lavie, Technion mechanical engineering professors and graduate students, and RAVSAK professionals, will evaluate each entry based on machine complexity as well as creative inclusion of Pesach items and texts. Winning videos will be shared on the Technion YouTube channel and RAVSAK website. Winning schools in both the middle and high school divisions will be awarded prizes to enhance a school’s science lab or maker space, including a state-of-the-art 3D printer (1st place) and Arduino electronics kits (2nd place). For more information and to register for the challenge, visit [www.ravsak.org/technionchallenge](http://www.ravsak.org/technionchallenge) or contact Yael Steiner at [yael@ravsak.org](mailto:yael@ravsak.org).

## Correction

In the Winter issue, the article “Ultimate Frisbee: Ultimate Fun, Ultimately Jewish” by Benjamin Joffe and Rabbi Judd Kruger Levingston PhD was incorrectly attributed in the print edition. The first half of the article was written by Joffe, the second half by Kruger Levingston. The attributions are handled correctly in the online version.



# REDEEMING JEWISH LITERACY

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JON A.  
LEVISOHN

Literacy has always referred to the ability to read, to decode and make sense of written texts. More than a technical skill, the ability to read provides a person with a gateway into whole worlds beyond their immediate experience, worlds into which they otherwise have no access. But in 1987, E. D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* changed how we think about literacy in fundamental ways. His argument was straightforward. In addition to decoding, readers need to understand a text's cultural references to make sense of that text. Without that background knowledge, technical abilities will not get you very far. "To be culturally literate," Hirsch declared at the opening of *Cultural Literacy*, "is to possess the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world."

*Cultural Literacy* was published at around the same time as Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, and for many people, they became linked as two sides of the same curmudgeonly coin. They both criticized the contemporary American educational system, and both seemed to be nostalgic for a time when everyone knew what they needed to know. Hirsch's motivation, however, was a noble one. He noticed the educational achievement gap based on economic inequality, and wanted to do something about it. If poor kids did not have access to the necessary cultural references in their home environments, then their schools needed to provide that access to help them compete with wealthier kids who did have that access. If their schools as currently constituted were not invested in giving them what they lacked, then the schools needed to change.

From that conviction, it was a short jump to the solution: composing lists of the important terms and concepts, and teaching them through direct instruction. After all, Hirsch wrote, "Knowledge of words is an adjunct to knowledge of cultural realities signified by words." Or to put the point even more succinctly: "Specific words go with specific knowledge." *Cultural Literacy* included lists of such words, and Hirsch followed up with more lists and books, with curricula, and even with a school reform movement (the "Core Knowledge" movement).

Nor was Hirsch's influence limited to cultural literacy in the public schools. His basic framework—the idea of "literacy" as comprising not a capacity to read, but rather a set of facts held in the head that serve as a conceptual foundation for reading—found expression in other arenas as well. For example, Joseph Telushkin's *Jewish Literacy* and Stephen Prothero's *Religious Literacy* captured some of the energy (and perhaps a healthy fraction of the sales) of the "cultural literacy" movement. And in case we are wondering about the relationship among these books, consider their dramatic subtitles:

*What Every American Needs to Know* (Hirsch); *The Most Important Things to Know about the Jewish People, Its People and Its History* (Telushkin); *What Every American Needs to Know [about Religion]—and Doesn't* (Prothero).

What these books have in common, and what their subtitles make explicit, is the idea that what someone needs to know, a specific set of facts, is contained between the covers of the book. But why? For these authors and those who were influenced by them, the original rationale of scaffolding the reading of challenging texts had long since been displaced by the desire to identify and catalog all the knowledge that they deemed important. Someone who does not know these things, they claimed, is illiterate.

So what began as an important insight into the ways in which reading is a culturally located enterprise of meaning-making became transformed over time into a set of connected beliefs about *curriculum*, *pedagogy* and *assessment*. First, the insight became transformed into a *curriculum* of isolatable facts. Second, in some settings, it became transformed into a *pedagogy* of direct instruction. After all, if you are convinced that students need to know something quite specific and concrete, why not just tell them that thing! Finally, it often became transformed into an approach to *assessment*—an approach that focuses on recognition and identification of the terms and concepts that, it was claimed, are so fundamental.

We can see the belief about assessment in the work of Stephen Prothero, who developed a "religious literacy quiz" that he has administered to college students at Boston University and elsewhere. He asks questions like, "Name the Four Gospels" and "Name the holy book of Islam." These questions are notable for two reasons: first, they seem to have clear answers, and second, for the most part, they seem like questions that reasonably intelligent and well-educated people *ought* to know. Because the answers can be assessed

objectively, and because ignorance of those objective answers seems indefensible or even appalling, the quiz takes on a veneer of impartiality and objectivity. We are then inclined to follow Prothero when he tells us that students with certain backgrounds score higher or lower on his quiz, or more generally, when he laments how much students do not know.

Something similar happened more recently with the work of my distinguished colleagues at Brandeis' Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, in the Israeli Literacy Measurement Project. What, they asked, should students know about Israel? How can we assess that knowledge? These are good and important conceptual problems. The project then approached these problems by developing a bank of multiple-choice questions, such as, "Who is the current prime minister of Israel?" and "With which Arab countries does Israel have signed peace treaties?" Alas, CMJS discovered that students are largely Israel-illiterate. To be clear, the authors of the study did not propose a curriculum or a pedagogy; their focus is assessment, and their approach to developing the test bank questions was deliberative. By validating the instrument, they proposed that others might use this assessment to determine whether their students are learning what we want them to learn about Israel: "The test bank is available to [others] and tests can be customized through item selection to assess knowledge gained over the course of a particular program, trip, or classroom experience."

The sensitive reader will have guessed that I have serious concerns about this entire approach. First, scholars such as Sam Wineburg have documented the ways in which standardized tests almost always "discover" that kids, no matter what age or from what background, don't know enough. This pattern has repeated itself for decades, in fact since the beginning of standardized testing. This strongly indicates that the problem is not these particular kids and their particular education but the approach to assessment itself, an approach that is designed to reveal gaps in knowledge. Rather than devising an instrument that tells us the facts that students do not know, how might the landscape look different once we understood what students *do* know?

The second worry about this approach, articulated by Jonah Hassenfeld in a column in the *Forward* about the Israel literacy work, is that there is scant evidence for a correlation between knowing isolated facts and being able to do serious thinking within the particular subject. Nobody is opposed to facts, of course. But the particular performance of correctly choosing among four possible answers in a multiple choice test is not foundational for higher thinking about Israel, any more than knowing Hirsch's cultural literacy terms is foundational for reading complicated texts. Facts are not the building blocks of meaning. Instead, we operate with what psychologists call "schemata," larger frameworks into which we organize information; we learn (and retain) facts only when we contextualize them in some schema, narrative or conceptual framework. That is where we ought to focus our pedagogic attention.

The third, related worry about this approach draws on a classic work in philosophy of education by Alfred North Whitehead. One hundred years ago, in 1916, Whitehead warned against "the passive reception of disconnected ideas, not illumined with any spark of vitality." The term he introduced was "inert ideas," which captures through an analogy with chemistry the ways in which certain ideas just sit there in the head (as it were), not interacting with other ideas, and importantly, not employed by their possessor for any constructive purpose. "Education with inert ideas," he wrote, "is not only useless; it is, above all things, harmful." But when we construct assessments that focus on individual facts, we run the risk of encouraging our educators to teach to those tests.

Where does this leave us? The alternative to literacy is illiteracy, and surely we do not want that. So let's go back to the original understanding of literacy to see whether it can be redeemed for the purposes of thinking about Jewish literacy as a goal of Jewish education.

The first step in redeeming the concept of literacy is to recall that, before Hirsch introduced his particular notion of cultural literacy, it referred to a human capacity, not to words or concepts. Someone who is literate can *do*

something that we think is worth doing. The philosopher Gilbert Ryle wrote about the difference between two kinds of knowledge, *know-how* and *know-that*. Hirsch-style cultural literacy is know-that. But literacy is know-how.

If we keep that in mind, then we will stay focused on the question of how to help students do that thing better. Hirsch's original insight is surely relevant: one of the reasons that students have trouble reading (at any level, in any subject) is that they encounter information that is unfamiliar to them. But the conclusion to be drawn is not that we should therefore teach them all that information in advance. Instead, the conclusion to be drawn is that we need to scaffold learning experiences to help students encounter and master increasingly difficult texts in whatever language those texts happen to be.

This leads to the second step: we should keep in mind that a person is not simply literate or illiterate, even though we sometimes use these terms. If we're being precise, what we mean to say is that someone has the capacity to read a *particular* language. To state the obvious, a person can be literate in one language, like English, and illiterate in another, like Hebrew.

This is true with regard to literal languages, like English or Hebrew. But it is true with regard to metaphorical languages as well. So we need to think harder about precisely what languages we aspire for Jews to be literate in—and these will be multiple rather than single. The Jewish religious, intellectual and cultural tradition is far too complicated to think about it as one language. There is a language of, for example, rabbinic literature. There is a language of Jewish philosophy and theology. There is an entirely different Jewish mystical language, and a Jewish language of moral development. There is a language of Jewish history, and a language of modern American Jewish literature. In the contemporary world, there is a language of *tikkun olam*, and a language of Jewish film and Jewish music and Jewish dance. The more specific and focused we are in our teaching-to-read—the clearer we are about what specific languages we are teaching—the more successful we will be.

The third and final step in redeeming the concept of Jewish literacy is to remember that literacy is not valuable in itself but rather for what it enables. Here we can draw on the teaching of Michael Rosenak, who used the twin metaphor of "language and literature" to express the purposes of Jewish education. What we are trying to do, he proposed, is "to initiate the young into the language of a culture by way of its most cherished literatures."

I have already noted above that it's important to replace the singular "language" with the plural "languages," since no one language encompasses Jewish culture. But the main point here is that, for Rosenak, we teach a language not via lists of words and concepts, but through literature, the finest and most articulate and "most cherished" expressions in that language. How do we become literate in a language? Rosenak's response: by reading. This approach rejects the naïve opposition between "skills" and "content," because understanding a language is not a content-neutral skill; you actually have to know the language!

That is not all, however; for Rosenak, the purpose of learning the language is not simply to read or to understand. Instead, after we have initiated the young into the language of a culture, our further and higher aim is for those individuals "to take part in the enterprise of making new literature." This is a dramatic claim. Should *every* reader become a writer, a speaker, a doer, a builder, a maker, a creator of new cultural expressions? Yes. That is the ultimate goal. Rosenak is after active expression in the language, not simply passive reception.

We are not interested in producing people who know a lot, people who in Whitehead's phrase have a lot of "inert ideas." We want people who *use* the language, who use their knowledge for constructive purposes. So when we think about Jewish literacy—when we think about designing a curriculum in the literature of a particular domain, when we think about promoting particular pedagogies to cultivate literacy, and when we think about constructing aspirational assessments—we must always keep in mind that our purpose, in teaching students to read, is to cultivate the capacity and disposition *to write*.

# JEWISH FLUENCY

## SETTING THE BAR HIGH

LISA  
EXLER

Many day schools boast creative and innovative programs that excite students about Judaism and produce graduates who continue their affiliation with the Jewish community. Yet many of these same students and graduates cannot independently navigate our core texts or comfortably and confidently practice Judaism. They may be enthusiastic about their Jewish identities, but they lack the skills, knowledge and experience to be the bearers and transmitters of Judaism into the next generation. If we want to truly ensure Jewish continuity, day schools must not only provide students with a compelling vision for Jewish life, we must give students *fluency* in the texts and practices that are the foundation of this vision so that they are empowered to own and shape the vision as well, in their own lives and in their communities.

### SO WHAT WOULD THIS “FLUENCY” LOOK LIKE?

Imagine someone who is fluent in a language. She has command of the language, understanding when it is spoken, reading and deciphering the meaning of texts, speaking in a way that is easily comprehensible to others, and writing descriptively and analytically in her own voice. Now imagine that this “language” is not Spanish or Chinese, but Judaism and that it encompasses Jewish texts and practices as well as the concepts, values, vocabulary and narratives on which they are based. Fluency, as opposed to literacy, in Jewish texts and practice means not only the acquisition of content knowledge but also the skills to independently engage with Jewish texts and practice. Fluency also signals a level of confidence, comfort and ownership that goes beyond literacy or familiarity.

### HOW DO WE GO ABOUT EDUCATING TOWARDS FLUENCY IN JEWISH TEXT AND PRACTICE?

One essential step is to create a shared definition or portrait of fluency towards which we are educating. Over the past year and a half I have conducted a field scan of Jewish education in day schools, visiting schools and talking with field experts, including scholars of Jewish education, day school teachers and directors of Jewish studies, representatives of the day school networks and staff at foundations that support Jewish education. Many practitioners want a set of standards to refer to as they articulate goals for their students. Standards would provide guidance on skills and dispositions to develop and also on content knowledge and material to master. A set of fluency standards would be a common point of reference, allowing practitioners in day schools from across the spectrum and around the country to clearly identify their educational outcomes.





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The Curriculum Project, a joint initiative of Mechon Hadar and Beit Rabban Day School, is in the process of producing a proposal for such a shared definition in the form of a set of standards for fluency in classical Jewish texts and practice. This document articulates standards in the areas of Tanakh, Torah shebe'al peh, tefillah and Jewish practice and includes a narrative "portrait of fluency," grade-level benchmarks, models of how the standards and benchmarks can give shape to a curriculum, detailed lists of content and sample curriculum maps.

As these are standards for fluency, they intentionally set the bar very high, articulating a level of skill, knowledge and commitment for children that is the necessary foundation for them to become adults who can sustain, participate in, promote, and teach a vision of Jewish life that is meaningful and compelling. These standards, therefore prioritize empowering students with skills to study Jewish texts independently and with broad and deep content knowledge. They seek to ensure that students have learned the whole Chumash and the narrative sections of Nach, can study rabbinic sources independently and consult them as a source for Jewish practice, and are comfortable incorporating these practices into their daily life. We do not mean to imply that students will regurgitate massive amounts of information. Rather, we assume that students have much content knowledge at their fingertips and possess the skills and contextual frameworks to look up what they don't remember. Finally, these standards emphasize the ability to make meaning of Jewish texts and practices and the inclination to view oneself as an inheritor and participant in the interpretive project of the Jewish people.

Practically speaking, using this definition, an eighth grader fluent in Jewish texts and practice can open a Mikraot Gedolot to any page, read and translate a chunk of pesukim, pose questions about what she read, offer her own interpretation and compare it to the unvocalized Rashi text which she can read and translate as well. She can walk into a synagogue on a weekday morning, listen attentively for a moment, identify where in the service the congregation is, open a siddur, find her place and participate in the tefillah. She knows which brachot to say before and after she eats, says them by heart, and can refer to and analyze the mishnayot in Masechet Brachot that form the basis of the practice of brachot. Finally, she seeks opportunities to enrich her learning and practice, participating in a shiur at her synagogue or choosing a text-intensive learning track at camp.

The standards for fluency that we are developing build upon the critically important work that has been done in the past fifteen years to establish standards in Jewish education. In particular, they are influenced by the Tanakh standards and emerging rabbinics standards from the Jewish Day School Standards and Benchmarks Project of the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education of JTS, the Zekelman Standards for Judaic Studies produced by the Menachem Education Foundation, and Moshe Sokolow's article "What Should a Yeshiva High School Graduate Know, Value and Be Able to Do?" which appeared in *Meorot: A Forum of Modern Orthodox Discourse*. These efforts merit the attention of any school that seeks to strengthen its Jewish studies program.

As I visited schools and met with field experts, I began to consider what conditions would need to be in place in order for a school to be well positioned to achieve fluency standards. Here are some questions I found myself asking:

- To what extent is there a culture of the deep importance of Jewish learning and practice? Are Jewish studies classes valued as much as English and math? How are Jewish holidays marked in school: are they only touchstones for strengthening Jewish identity, or is there also a goal to empower students to master the texts and rituals that make up the core of these special days?
- To what extent are the limited resources of time and money allocated towards Jewish learning? How many hours of instruction per week are dedicated to Jewish text learning, tefillah and Hebrew? What percentage of the school's budget is dedicated to supporting Jewish learning and practice through the purchase of books and educational resources as well as the salaries of talented staff and administrators?

- What qualifications are expected of Jewish studies teachers in terms of their Jewish text skills, content knowledge and pedagogy? To what extent are staff able to serve as role models not only of passion and commitment to a compelling vision of Judaism but also of fluency in text and practice? How comfortable and capable are Jewish studies teachers of pursuing students' interests and questions on the spot, by bringing in their own knowledge, consulting reference books and making connections to other texts?
- Strong Hebrew language skills are necessary for fluency in Jewish texts. To what extent is Hebrew language learning prioritized? Are students' Hebrew skills strong enough by the time they begin studying classical Jewish texts to enable them to understand basic vocabulary in the text?
- Fluency encompasses the development of technical skills (navigating a Chumash, reading and translating, distinguishing between different voices in a text), the acquisition of content knowledge (key characters and their relationships, major events and plot lines) and the cultivation of particular attitudes, values and dispositions (respect for the text and those who have interpreted it, critical thinking). To what extent do curriculum maps and learning activities address all three of these areas?
- What tools are being used to assess student learning in Jewish texts and practice? How are teachers and school leaders held accountable for the learning that happens both in Jewish studies classes and more informally through holiday celebrations and special programs? To what extent do assessments influence curriculum development and instruction?

As two Jewish educational institutions that are focused on the centrality of text study, we at Mechon Hadar and Beit Rabban Day School are passionate about helping to train the next generation's bearers and transmitters of Jewish texts and traditions. We believe strongly that students fluent in the texts and practice of Judaism will be our community's source of strength and vitality in the years ahead. These students will be the engine of our culture and will shape and lead the Jewish community of tomorrow. Day schools play a critical role in equipping students for this responsibility. For some schools, an ambitious adoption of these standards in full will align with the school's mission and student body. For others, using the standards as a shared point of reference for student achievement in Jewish studies will clarify instructional goals and point the way towards raising the level of Jewish studies instruction across the field. As the standards are finalized, we are very excited to work with schools of all types to enable this emphasis on fluency in both skills and content to strengthen all of our students.

There is much work to be done, and we are optimistic. In my visits to schools I have seen examples of students who are achieving fluency: students who can open the Chumash and independently translate the text, compare it to a parallel narrative and ask questions about the similarities and differences; students who enthusiastically lead their peers in tefillah; and students who refer to the sugya in Bava Metzia about *aniyei ircha kodmin* (the poor of your town take precedence) when discussing where to allocate the money their class has collected for tzedakah.

In addition, since its inception 25 years ago, Beit Rabban Day School has served as a model for the commitment to educating students for fluency in Jewish text and practice. Indeed, the standards themselves are greatly influenced by Beit Rabban's approach of combining an emphasis on the development of strong skills and content knowledge with rigorous and deep inquiry and interpretation. As we further align our curriculum guide with these fluency standards, we are seeing how the standards help us strengthen and sharpen our curriculum maps, unit outlines, assessments and learning activities. Our students' skills, content knowledge and enthusiasm continue to increase, and our teachers report that their clearer understanding of educational goals and outcomes has helped them focus and improve their instruction.

We look forward to sharing these standards with the field in the coming months. We hope that as these standards are implemented, field-tested and revised, they contribute to the development of the next generation of empowered Jews, equipped with the knowledge, skills and passion which are their birthright and which will to ensure the creative vitality of Torah and the Jewish community well into the future.

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JONATHAN  
KRASNER

# BETWEEN UNIVERSALISM AND PARTICULARISM

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## RETHINKING THE TEACHING OF JEWISH HISTORY

Choosing to educate one's children in a day school demands a set of compromises made in the interests of cultivating within them religious and cultural literacy, and a sense of collective belonging. Beyond the impact of day school tuition on the family budget, an oft-cited drawback by prospective day school parents is the lack of cultural and socio-economic diversity. Research conducted by Steven M. Cohen and Shaul Kelner ("Why Jewish Parents Send Their Children to Day School") confirms that day schools are perceived by many as a "ghettoizing" force, a setting that "deprive[s] youngsters of the ability to interact with non-Jews."

To some extent, the merits of this argument are weakened by the pervasive economic and racial homogeneity in suburban public schools and independent schools. How much diversity, one wonders, would prospective day school students actually experience if they matriculated into those institutions? Regardless, one should not minimize the implications of educating in a culturally and religiously homogeneous environment. Even those day schools that reflect the cultural, economic and religious diversity within the Jewish community are still religiously uniform by design. The homogeneity of the student body facilitates the school's larger objective of boundary maintenance. But it also presents a dilemma that demands a curricular response, as the school must help students interpret the day school's brand of segregation. To be sure, students' understandings will be influenced by social cues that they absorb both within and outside of the school building. But the school curriculum provides students with an authorized interpretation of their social reality.

Arguably, nowhere within the curriculum are messages about insiders and outsiders conveyed more directly than in Jewish social

studies and history, including the study of the Shoah and Israel. Typically, educators are explicit in viewing these disciplines as vehicles for cultivating citizenship and a sense of group belonging. Thus, it disproportionately falls to teachers of Jewish history and social studies to help students make meaning out of the Jewish imperative of social distinctiveness and to figure out how to square this with America's multicultural and pluralistic ethos. In the best-case scenario, they will empower their students to wear their distinctiveness as a badge of honor without feeding a chauvinistic instinct. Identification will translate into Jewish commitment without fostering disconnection from America's social fabric or blunt students' sense of obligation to pursue social justice.

If the quest for equilibrium in day school settings between universalism and particularism is hardly novel, it is seldom easy or straightforward. The most fundamental problem in the context of Jewish history and social studies is the content focus of most day school classrooms. When they aren't focused on biblical and Second Temple times, Jewish history and social studies curricula tend to concentrate on the Jewish experience in modern Europe



and Israel. The Eurocentric narrative arc, with its dramatic story of emancipation, destruction and Zionist rebirth, is undeniably compelling and consequential. But it is also increasingly distant from and incongruous with the lived experience of Jewish young people in North America today. Far from a failure, citizenship and integration has yielded an unprecedented degree of acceptance, security and prosperity for Jews in the United States and Canada. Concurrently, the American Jewish community has become increasingly ethnically and racially diverse, with fewer Jewish young people tracing their lineage (exclusively) to central and Eastern Europe.

Applying a backwards design model to the teaching of Jewish history, one is immediately struck by the need for curricular reform. Day schools today should be preparing graduates to thrive in an American milieu. The enduring understandings that students come away with should relate to their lived reality. An obvious approach to this challenge would be for students to study and make meaning of the American Jewish experience. Yet a recent survey of twenty representative day schools in the United States revealed that American Jewish history is rarely taught as a stand-alone course in grades 6-12, and typically given little or no attention in standard modern Jewish or US history courses.

The work of helping students prepare for Jewish life journeys that strike a healthy balance between universalism and particularism should be near the top of day school educators' agenda. An inquiry-based approach to American Jewish history—or other countries of the Diaspora where day schools are located—that identifies underlying themes and patterns, while also exploring enduring tensions, would encourage students to think about the challenge of inhabiting multiple identities. Moreover, an American Jewish narrative that explores the predicament and blessings of cultural pluralism would help day school students appreciate how the cultural and religious Jewish immersion they experienced in school can be channeled in ways that nourish American pluralism and expand its perimeter even as it also serves to enrich and fortify American Jewish life on both the individual and communal levels.

It is not coincidental that the very term “cultural pluralism” was coined by an American Jewish philosopher—Horace Kallen—who rejected the dominant paradigm of America as a melting pot in favor of a symphony. Influenced by John Dewey and Henry James, Kallen's thought emphasized how the right to be different can and should be balanced with a responsibility to participate in American democracy. It is time for Kallen's vision (informed by contemporary thinking about multiple identities) to undergo a twenty-first century reboot.

Fortunately, there are already a few excellent readily available educational resources that facilitate the kind of learning that needs to be going on in day school Jewish history classrooms. Among the best are the lessons on Jews in the Labor Movement and Jews in the Civil Rights Movement created by the Jewish Women's Archive. Both can be found in the Living the Legacy section of the JWA website, which also includes primary sources and related Jewish texts. Another stand-out example is “Religious Freedom and Democracy: Teaching George Washington's Letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island,” a joint project of Facing History and Ourselves and the George Washington Institute for Religious Freedom. A recently launched educational initiative at the National Museum of American Jewish History promises to expand on the available repertoire. Hopefully, it will also provide schools and teachers with a needed push to disrupt the Eurocentric Jewish historical paradigm and elevate the American Jewish experience to a more prominent place in the curriculum.

Charles Seixas



## Reshet Roundup

By Debra Shaffer Seeman, RAVSAK's Network Weaver

RAVSAK Reshet groups (networks) have been bursting at the seams with networking opportunities in recent months. Each of these activities has grown out of online peer-to-peer interactions in our ongoing efforts to support and respond to the conversations, questions and requests taking place within the Reshet groups.

The Board Leadership Reshet recently conducted a roundtable conversation about open-enrollment policies, focused on the impact of Jewish community day schools admitting non-Jewish students. Participants described how and whether admitting non-Jewish students fit into their school's mission. A number of school leaders described their school's decision not to exclude the few non-Jewish students who have applied for admission. The smaller number of schools who have a more explicit set of guidelines responded to questions about their admissions policies, funding implications and other repercussions surrounding the school's decision to admit non-Jewish students, educational ramifications, effects on staffing, complications for school marketing, and general community feedback. Questions about safeguarding the Jewish mission and vision of the school were high on the agenda as well. Panelists were met with engaging questions, and the event sparked additional conversations within the Board Leadership Reshet community.

Another fruitful outgrowth of Reshet work has been RAVSAK's partnership with Sefaria, a dynamic interactive website for Jewish text innovation. Sefaria's Director of Education Sara Wolkenfeld gave a two-part training for Judaic directors in the use of its platform. Sefaria will serve as the recommended platform for Jewish text integration in our Technion Jewish Day School Challenge. We look forward to learning about the creative ways educators are integrating Sefaria.org into their classrooms.

The Reshet groups have been humming with a multitude of webinar learning opportunities. Guest speakers have included Dr. Sandy Miller Jacobs on differentiation, Emory's Dr. Ken Stein on effective Israel education, the Technion's Jessica Feldan on fundraising, Rabbi Ron Wolfson for the Torah Lishmah series, Dr. Yoni Schwab explaining ADHD, and RAVSAK's Dr. Marc Kramer offering tips for negotiating a head of school contract. Special sessions have been held for particular groups: a peer assist consultancy for small schools, a security roundtable for school heads, a Hebrew and Judaics K-5 benchmarks working group, a board leadership peer learning group, and a training for heads along with Reshet Keshet on building a gender-inclusive school.

Check out upcoming Reshet professional development and networking opportunities:

March 2, Dr. Harry Bloom: Five Strategies for Overcoming the Special Governance and Fundraising Challenges of a Small Day School

March 17, Jeff Goldenberg: Risk Management for Schools: Insurance for Every Eventuality

March 30, Dr. Harry Bloom: Insider Tips for Increasing Non-Orthodox Enrollment and Implications for Proactive Recruitment Practices

April 5, Torah Lishmah with Dr. Ruth Calderon

May 5, Torah Lishmah with Avraham Infeld

If you would like to get involved with any Reshet events or would like help to network with your colleagues, reach out to me at [debra@ravsak.org](mailto:debra@ravsak.org).



# TORAH LISHMAH

## LEARNING FOR LEARNING'S SAKE

Recharge your battery and invest in your own learning. Some of the top names in Jewish education were asked: What Jewish text do you wish that your teachers had learned before you entered their classroom? They'll share their answers with RAVSAK in our newest series, Torah Lishmah: Learning for Learning's Sake. Come replenish your mind and your heart.

APRIL

5

### DR. RUTH CALDERON

Established the first Israeli secular, pluralistic, and egalitarian Beit Midrash. Founder of ALMA, a center that seeks to acquaint Israelis with Hebrew culture. Former Knesset member from the Yesh Atid Party, where she was Deputy Speaker and Chair of the Lobby for Jewish Renewal.

MAY

5

### AVRAHAM INFELD

President Emeritus of Hillel - The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life and the founder, president, chair, and director of a succession of innovative educational institutions including Melitz, Arevim, Chais Family Foundation, and Israel Way Oranim.

All events 12-1pm Eastern/9-10am Pacific

**RSVP at [ravsak.org/rsvp-torah-lishmah](http://ravsak.org/rsvp-torah-lishmah)**

These events are free of charge and open to all professional and lay members of RAVSAK schools. Please reach out to Debra Shaffer Seeman, RAVSAK's Network Weaver, with any questions about these events. [debra@ravsak.org](mailto:debra@ravsak.org)



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 YEHUDA  
RAPOPORT

# RAMBAM'S MODEL OF JEWISH LITERACY

Through the ages, Jewish literacy has been defined in a variety of ways. The priorities and values of one community or generation have shaped and shifted what texts have been given privilege over others. The bread and butter of one generation becomes the irrelevant minutiae of the next. A disregarded text can suddenly take center stage. New methodologies emerge; “old” methodologies are discarded or reemerge. A multitude of factors affect these developments. Too often, however, what passes as literacy is formulated haphazardly.

In the medieval period, Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (1135-1204), the Rambam, stands out in his formulation of the goals and praxis of Jewish education. His work can serve as an instructive example of how to think systematically about Jewish literacy—to make thoughtful decisions about what should stand at the center of Jewish literacy and what at the periphery.

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## THE MOTIVATION FOR LEARNING TORAH

In the last chapter of his Laws of Teshuvah, the Rambam says that all of Shir haShirim is a metaphor for the *ahavah hare'uyah*, the most proper love of God, which can be compared to being love-sick, obsessively preoccupied with the thought of one's beloved. When the Sages, the rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmud, adjured us to learn Torah lishmah, for its own sake, they were instructing us to learn Torah for one, simple reason, according to the Rambam: because we love He who commanded us to make it our preoccupation.

Though, at first glance, there doesn't seem to be anything terribly radical about this formulation, there is something surprising (at least for some readers) in how this formulation of the ultimate telos of learning Torah translates into praxis. To achieve this love, Rambam asserts, one must dedicate oneself to the study of those branches of wisdom that most readily propagate a consciousness of one's Maker—topics that the Rambam fortunately presented, in general outline, in the first four chapters of the Laws of the Foundations of the Torah, such as God's existence, His incorporeality, the nature of the angels, God's knowledge, the structure of the cosmos, the nature of the soul, etc. These are topics we commonly refer to as physics and metaphysics and which the Rambam refers to by the evocative name *Pardes*, meaning orchard or grove. This term, used in the Talmud to refer to esoteric knowledge that leads to communion with God, is adapted by the Rambam to refer to different bodies of knowledge that in his view achieve the same end.



What's shocking is the almost paradoxical suggestion that to achieve the ultimate motivation for learning Torah one needs to engage in a study of subjects that are far removed from Torah itself. What's even more surprising is that these are subjects that are known, for the most part, through foreign sources. The writings of Aristotle, Alexander of Aphrodisias and Al-Farabi would top the list of the Rambam's sources for these topics—all pagan or Muslim philosophers.

## IS THERE A TEXT IN THIS CLASS?

But this is not the only surprising element of the Rambam's curriculum. In the first chapter of the Laws of Torah Learning he rewords the famous prescription of Rebbe Yehoshua ben Chananya (Kiddushin 30a) to divide one's Torah study between Mikra (Bible), Mishnah and Talmud, thereby shifting the focus of Jewish education from text (though text is obviously indispensable) to method of instruction:

One is obligated to divide the time of study into three: one third, **Torah she-bikhtav**—written instruction; one third, **Torah shebe'al peh**—oral instruction; and one third, one should understand and comprehend the conclusion of a matter from its premises, induct one matter from another and compare one matter to another, and make judgements using the methods whereby the Torah is expounded to the point that he knows the essence of those methods and how the prohibited and permitted, and other such things learned from the oral tradition, are derived—and this is what is called **Talmud**.

How so? If he be a craftsman, he should devote three hours a day in his work, and nine hours to Torah. In those nine hours: for three of them, read the Torah shebikhtav; three, Torah shebe'al peh; and three, contemplate with one's mind to understand one matter from another.

The "words of the [prophetic] tradition" are considered part of the Torah shebikhtav; and their explanation, part of the Torah shebe'al peh. The topics referred to as Pardes are included in Talmud.

The only text that is indispensable would be the text of Torah she-bikhtav—there can be no substitute for the Tanakh in its entirety. The Rambam created his own text to study Torah shebe'al peh—the Mishneh Torah. And remarkably, he defines Talmud not as a specific text, but as a mode of thinking.

It ends up that for the Rambam, none of the classic rabbinic texts would be included in his ideal curriculum. In the introduction to the Mishneh Torah, he indicates that his text would make every other text unnecessary. Though as he stated in a letter to Rabbi Pinchas ben Meshullam (see Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides*, 30-37) he had no wish to dispose of any of those texts (and even continued to teach some of them to his students), the Rambam makes abundantly clear in other letters that he, upon publishing the Mishneh Torah, rendered those texts peripheral to the essential business of Torah learning.

## THE ULTIMATE GOAL OF LEARNING TORAH

Let us now look at the next paragraph in the Laws of Torah Study:

Under what condition does this [tripartite division] apply? In the beginning of one's studies. But as one grows in wisdom, it is no longer necessary to constantly study Torah shebikhtav or be involved in Torah shebe'al peh. Read at apportioned times Torah shebikhtav and the words of the oral tradition so that no element of the laws of the Torah should be forgotten, and direct all of one's days to Talmud alone, in accordance with the expanse of one's heart and settledness of mind.

The Rambam has presented a complex system. First, and foremost, a student must learn the laws of the Torah so that they can be observed and fulfilled. Though this pursuit never loses its significance, when one reaches a certain degree of development, one "graduates" to what he calls Talmud. The significance of this graduation, of course, can only be understood from the perspective of a course of study with an ultimate objective. This, the Rambam most clearly presents at the end of his presentation of Pardes, at the end of the fourth chapter of The Laws of the Foundations:

I say that it is not proper to venture into the Pardes save one that has filled his stomach with bread and meat. This bread and meat is to know the explanation of the prohibited and the permitted and similar matters from other commandments. Now, even though these matters are called *davar katan*, a small matter, by the Sages—for the Sages say, *davar gadol*, a great matter, refers to Ma'aseh Merkavah, the account of the chariot, and *davar katan*, refers to the debates of Abaye and Rava. Even so, it is fitting to study them first, for they settle a person's mind first. And furthermore, they are the great good bestowed by the Holy One, blessed is He, to settle this world in order to inherit the world to come. And it is possible for everyone to know them—great and small, man and woman, one with an expansive mind and one with a limited mind.

In other words, as one advances in one's studies, one's horizons expand as well. Though one begins by studying a relatively small matter, the details of the Halakhah, this study is preparatory to a great matter (physics and metaphysics), the study of which brings one to the ultimate level in the service of God, a service performed out of pure love. This perspective makes the "graduation" to Talmud perfectly clear. It is a course of study, which includes within it the topics of Pardes—that which instills both the highest motivation and is, in fact, the ultimate aim of Torah learning. What's more, even when one is engaged in *davar katan* for less than ideal reasons—fear of punishment—one is paving the way for that which will ultimately instill the highest motivation: the study of Pardes.

## CONCLUSION

It should be made clear that the Rambam's curriculum was not a radical departure from the prevailing trends in the community in which he lived (though he certainly had his share of critics). Rabbi Yitzchak Alfasi (1013-1103) reduced the Talmud to its practical conclusions, excising all extraneous debate, and incorporated the rulings of the Gaonim into his halakhot. Alfasi's student, Rabbi Yosef ibn Migash (1077-1141), the Rambam's father's teacher, endorsed the mastery of Halakhah from the study of responsa literature and summaries. Bachya ibn Pakuda (11th century), in his *Duties of the Heart*, disparaged those who "waste" their time engaged in dialectics over impractical legal minutiae and adjured his readers not to neglect the "obligations of the heart" which include a thorough study of natural philosophy. What's truly remarkable was not the originality of the Rambam's path, but his ability to present his educational plan coherently and systematically, as well as the great influence he exerted.

Perhaps the most important lesson we can learn from the Rambam is how his system extends the limits of what many would feel comfortable thinking of as "Jewish" literacy. If physics and metaphysics could be incorporated into the Rambam's Jewish curriculum, what about the mathematics and science of our day? Is it right to call these subjects "secular"? For that matter, what about literature and history? Could these be included within the rubric of "Jewish literacy" as well? These are questions worth considering. The Rambam certainly wouldn't shy away from offering a well thought out answer.

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RAFI  
CASHMAN

# TANAKH LITERACY, FOR THE JEWISH PRESENT

“Literacy is about more than reading and writing—it is about how we communicate in society. It is about social practices and relationships, about knowledge, language and culture.” UNESCO

One day, an eighth-grade student who refused to put on tefillin during tefillah came into my office. Our conversation segued into his lack of connection to the Judaic studies program as a whole because, he said, “It’s not relevant to me.” Knowing he was a strong student in math (a subject that I could never relate to), I asked if he found math relevant. He explained, quite simply, “I’ll need math when I go to university.” Talk about deferred gratification!

This interaction helped me understand something about what makes student learning meaningful or relevant. The positive experience in learning math for this student was not primarily about personal relevance, but about what had value within the larger framework within which he lived, what had relevance in his own cultural and social environment—what I will call here the “story” or “narrative” that one inhabits. In this student’s story, university entrance is paramount, and he, not even having graduated middle school, had this socially constructed value at the front of his mind, one which has deeply impacted his approach to

learning—all despite the lack of immediate or personal relevance.

On the other hand, a vast amount of the Jewish content that students learn does not fit into a story that makes it meaningful to them. While teachers, passionate about the relevance of their material, try to create personal relevance and meaningful connections for students, absent a relevant “story,” their words generally fall on deaf ears. One must be able to connect to students’ existing story or narrative, and there are few Jewish stories that do so in a meaningful way.

To that end, I would like to suggest the notion of Tanakh literacy as one that can help build a narrative within which the many pieces of Jewish learning and knowledge can situate themselves for learners. What I am speaking about is not merely the sum of important Torah facts (even though this is important to create a larger Jewish cultural narrative), but a grounding story or narrative, which will be as natural to our students as the American and Western ones are. This assumes a broad notion of literacy, as referenced in

the epigraph from UNESCO above. Stories, more than facts and ritual practices, are the context within which we create meaning, grounding, and ultimately, identity. Stories therefore not only form the basis of a particular set of literacy practices, but also are themselves part and parcel of the practices themselves. We are not only storytellers, but story dwellers.

I have two things in mind when I speak about developing Tanakh literacy aimed toward developing a Jewish story for our students.

- A deep understanding of the central story, learned in a theme-driven manner, of the birth and founding of the Jewish people—i.e., from God's call to Avraham, to the Exodus from Egypt and the receiving of the Torah. This is the core story of the Jewish people, without reference to which there is little coherence religiously, in terms of the Land of Israel (and consequently Zionism and modern Israel—*me-haTanakh le-Palmach*), or Jewish peoplehood (as opposed to being part of a faith community like Christianity). This is a story that creates coherence and meaning in a contemporary Jewish life. These are not to exclude the many other stories that we have adopted and adapted in the millennia since and which have moral or religious meaning. Rather, that no matter the cultural changes or communal affiliations we experience, these founding narratives will inevitably persist and return, and form the basis for all contemporary Jewish identity and expression. Again, the stories must be theme-driven, to lend coherence and develop a set of big ideas or meaningful narratives.
- A strong set of literary skills is necessary to develop interpretative, and not just decoding independence with the Tanakh text. These skills allow for a direct and unmediated experience of the text, which is key to allowing learners to dwell within these stories, develop personal connection, and not simply listen to them passively.

Let me expand on these points, and give an example below. Within the narrative arc I reference, one finds the basic themes of life that are the touchstones of the Jewish lens: justice and righteousness (Avraham and Sedom), deception and its consequences (Ya'akov), change and personal growth (Yosef), the pain of leadership (Yehudah), pursuit of relationship with the Divine (Avraham), and much more. These ideas, relevant now as they were then, are pursued through the lives of the people who form the basis of Jewish identification and Jewish peoplehood, and which imbue present day Jewish culture and discourse. Learning these stories with our students provides them with a compelling narrative and language, one that not only guides them as individuals, as all great stories do, but also gives them a larger sense of social connectedness to the Jewish people. These narratives also give coherence and form to the Jewish particulars of practice and

values that are so much of a part of contemporary Jewish identification.

This vision of Jewish literacy also requires clearly articulated and developed literary textual skills: not only the micro reading and decoding skills (which I'd suggest are of lesser importance, even as there is a strong argument for their necessity), but the broader literary skills that make a text meaningful, and which allow larger patterns and ideas in the text to emerge. The literary approach is strongly manifested both in religious settings (such as Yeshivat Gush Etzion) and in the academy (including Robert Alter and many others), with a fruitful crossover between these two camps. This approach to Tanakh empowers the reader to engage directly with the text, and to ultimately see the bigger picture of its purpose—to the stories in their totality, with the concomitant impact it has on the broader notion of literacy as framed above.

This part of skill development is deeply intertwined with the content goal above, as it leads the learner to think broadly and deeply about the Torah text and the larger messages it is trying to share. Too often we get caught up in the smaller details, perhaps a bi-product of the medieval verse-by-verse form of interpretation that is so common, and our prioritization of the commentators themselves as the meaning-makers of the text. And since most day-school Jews at some point will end up sitting in front of two core texts—the siddur and the Tanakh—this approach well serves the goal of lifelong learning.

I would like to use the story of Avraham and the destruction of Sedom as an example. In one of the most famous conversations in Tanakh, Avraham challenges God in His decision to destroy the city. This conversation, and the implied ability for a limited human to challenge a perfect and infinite God, is often at the center of discussion and interest. I believe this is the case because it appeals to our Western sense of autonomy even in religious practice. It challenges the assumption that human agency vis-a-vis God is off limits.

Following the thinking of Rabbi Menachem Liebtog, I would like to suggest an approach that makes this conversation even richer and more deeply relevant. If one looks at the story from a literary point of view, the conversation between God and Avraham is the second part of what takes place within one long parshiyah of the Torah, that is, a text that is bounded by open space on either side (this text begins with Bereishit 18:1 and ends with 19:38). The parshiyah, established in ancient times, can be considered as a literary unit, and forces the reader to consider the entire narrative that falls within it in a holistic fashion. In this parshiyah, the very same angels that destroy Sedom inform Avraham of the birth of his son, implying a relationship between these two events. The annunciation is followed by God saying, "Shall I hide from Avraham what I am about to

do, since Avraham is to become a great nation? ... For I have singled him out in order that he will instruct **his children** and their family afterward to keep the way of God by doing what is **just and right** (*tzedakah umishpat*)" (18:17-19). The story of Sedom and its lack of righteousness is, it would seem, the literary counterpoint to the very central mission of *tzedakah umishpat* that God has given to Avraham and his children, promised in the first part the parshiyah. Read this way, the core idea of the entire parshiyah is that *tzedakah umishpat*, qualities absent from Sedom, are at the core of what God wants of Avraham and his children following, including us today as Jews.

What makes this reading particularly valuable is its capacity to serve as a larger story within which many Jewish values and practices gain meaning and significance. It creates a framework for talking about everything from social justice, to the laws of *tzedakah* (this language is used by the Rambam in Hilchot Matanot Aniym 10:1), to tefillah (the eleventh prayer of the Shmoneh Esrei: "Blessed are You...O King who loves *tzedakah umishpat*") and more. In this way, *tzedakah umishpat* emerge as core language to be used in class and school that represent the highest values of Jewish purpose, and they emerge from the foundational stories of the Torah. This approach provides our students with a Jewish language rooted in the Torah's story. When this language comes to inform student practice through service learning, it allows learners to live within a Jewish story through the breadth of their lives.


Tanakh literacy is more than just about creating material that is compelling or personally relevant. It is about building a contemporary Jewish story upon our most basic Jewish stories, and one that is meshed with the narrative of today's day school student. And while one could argue that Talmud, or other eras or ideas of Jewish life (Hassidut, Haskalah, the Holocaust, or the State of Israel and Zionism) are also potentially compelling narratives, all have the downside of their more limited scope relative to the broad reach of the Torah's stories. At its core, this is the central narrative of the foundation of the Jewish people, regardless of one's community, religious proclivity or affiliation.

One could argue that there is no revolution in the ideas I present here. After all, what day school does not teach these stories? What is significant, however, is the lens through which these texts are approached, the means by which they should be approached, and the ends they are meant to achieve. Do they function as grand communal narratives, or are they quaint stories of an ancient tradition? Finally, this is not an argument for a Tanakh-only education. Rather, it is an argument about placing the foundational stories of the Chumash at the center, and the understanding that students need to be able to access these stories directly, in order to support a vitalized, contemporary, relevant Jewish story.









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ABI  
DAUBER  
STERNE

# JEWISH FLUENCY

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## CREATING A NEW CULTURE

What's the difference between the following two sets of questions?

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Who was the first Prime Minister of Israel?  
What is the first of the Ten Commandments?

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Why has Israel always been important to the Jewish people?  
I don't believe in God. Can I still be Jewish?

If these were questions on an exam, each pair would be testing for a very different kind of knowledge. The first pair are questions whose answers could be easily “googled.” The second two require some “google-able” knowledge, but they also require analytical skills, the ability to synthesize nuanced information, and ultimately the ability to organize the answer into a fluid well-constructed response.

This difference is what I call literacy vs. fluency. At Hillel International we have developed a “Jewish Fluency Assessment,” and we use it help us set a bar for the kind of knowledge and abilities we increasingly expect Hillel staff to have. The creation of this assessment was spurred by a new project supported by the Maimonides Fund, called the Ezra Fellowship ([www.hillel.org/ezra](http://www.hillel.org/ezra)). The assessment was developed by researching Jewish literacy tests and courses that are used at other institutions (the Jewish Agency For Israel's test for shlichim, Bar Ilan University's undergraduate requirements, synagogue Judaism 101 courses, etc.), and by having discussions and focus groups with Hillel professionals about the specific knowledge that is needed to respond to the issues that arise most often for Jewish students on college campuses.

We called this a “fluency” assessment, rather than “literacy” assessment, because, as demonstrated in the questions above, fluency is an indicator of literacy, but literacy is not an indicator of fluency. Literacy indicates a person's knowledge of a certain subject matter, whereas fluency is about the ease with which one can explain ideas in a clear and compelling way. Our work as educators, particularly in the work of informal education, hinges on our ability to fluently and fluidly explain Jewish ideas, enrich an impromptu conversation, or infuse a group experience with Jewish framings. While Jewish literacy is certainly a part of this, knowing the names and dates of Jewish historical events and figures, or citing chapter and verse from the Torah, do not ensure a rich educational experience for a student.

Over 100 people have taken the assessment to date, and we've begun to analyze the data to uncover which Jewish experiences and what kind of education correlate with a high score on the assessment. Individuals who had been on an immersive Jewish experience tended to score higher than those who had not. In addition, those who had been to Israel (beyond a Birthright experience) scored higher than those who did not go to Israel. And, finally, those who had both camp and Hebrew or day school tended to score higher as well.

While, at first blush, these results are unsurprising, there are a number of salient findings. Our assessment, as it does not test for comprehensive



Jewish literacy, does seem to indicate that immersive Jewish experiences (such as retreats, youth group shabbatons, Limmud) correlate with a general fluency. That is, people who've lived—even if for short bursts of time—in a “surround-sound” Jewish environment are more likely to be articulate about questions relating to Jewish life. Equally interesting is that Jewish camp was highly correlated with success on this assessment, in combination with either Hebrew or day school. In other words, for this assessment, neither Hebrew or day school were the key alone, but rather a camp experience was what correlated with exceptional answers to the questions on the assessment. Again, this is likely pointing to the difference between the “textbook” knowledge that is taught in schools, and the “lived” knowledge that is gained in a camp experience.

Certainly, there are confounding variables between the correlations. For example, individuals who participated in all the above activities are more likely to have come from Jewishly engaged families. Nonetheless, imagine if we could use these findings to either to give preference to hiring individuals with these experiences in their background, or alternatively, if we could provide these experiences to all Jewish communal professionals and students.

The impact that this Jewish Fluency Assessment has begun to have at Hillel is also notable. First, the very fact that we have an assessment is a signal to our staff that we value Jewish knowledge and experience. It is beginning to create a culture—even in our informal educational setting—where Jewish knowledge and the ability to share this knowledge is prized. This has the potential to help us attract professionals who either have this knowledge or are deeply interested in acquiring it. In turn, this will mean that Hillel will become (if it hasn't already) a magnet for Jewish seekers, learners and teachers.

Secondly, this assessment has given us some benchmarks for our work, as well as guidance for what's next on our professional development agenda. Increasingly, as we are finding that Jewish fluency is critical to our work, we are also getting clearer on what that fluency looks like and how to help people acquire it.

Of course, it leaves us with a lot of questions for research as well. How do we teach towards fluency, in addition to literacy? What are the pedagogies for teaching students to go beyond the facts? How do we help people take what they know, and craft this knowledge into compelling narratives and existential ideas?

We are also exploring whether fluency can be acquired later in life. In addition to formative childhood and young adult educational experiences, can a 30- or 40-year old acquire this fluency, and if so, in what settings? What are the prerequisites for acquiring Jewish fluency, and what is the curriculum?

The curriculum question will likely be the most difficult to answer. What are the content areas that a pluralistic informal educational organization like Hillel can expect all professionals to know? How do we ensure that the material taught generates discussions of issues of existential meaning? What big ideas should be included, and what philosophical and other frameworks are helpful in training educators to go beyond numbers and facts? How do we keep the material relevant to the reality of what college students are interested in talking about? Of course, we do have a good sense of the modalities in which this curriculum ought to be taught. Drawing from Jonathan Woocher's article “Reinventing Jewish Education for the 21st Century,” we know that any material we develop (and have already begun to develop) will be “learner-centered, relationship-infused, and life-relevant.”

Finally, as I think about the notion of fluency, I draw from the work of Michael Rosenak. Rosenak's vision of the cultured and educated Jew was one who could use Jewish language to create new Jewish literature. For Rosenak the language is the Torah, and literature is the classic commentaries on the Torah. In Rosenak's words, “Literature” I understand to refer to what people (can) do within the specific language into which they have been initiated, thereby demonstrating the language's vitality and its ability to provide a cultural home for different people, in diverse times and circumstances.”

In other words, the goal of being fluent in a language is to both perpetuate and create new literature and new culture. For Hillel, the goal of having professionals who have Jewish fluency is no less.





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ELIEZER  
SNEIDERMAN

# ROOM TO BREATHE

## CREATING AIR IN PLURALISTIC JEWISH EDUCATION

It is challenging to design curricula for a pluralistic school. Central to the concept of pluralism is the belief that there is no one correct way to “be Jewish.” When it comes to behavior, no pluralistic educator would say, “This is how a student should behave.” Yet there does not seem to be the same reluctance to say, “This is what a student should know.”

Yet this line of thinking smacks of an essentialism that should make pluralistic educators uncomfortable. Do we accept that there are essential and necessary qualities that define a Jew? If a student does not need to keep kosher or observe Shabbat to be considered a Jew, why should they need to know Tanakh? The classical idea of education, that there exists a canon that students must absorb to be considered educated, seems antithetical to pluralism. How can we test students on their approximation to an ideal if we do not accept the concept of an ideal? Classical texts may not resonate with all students. Is Jewish education then about forcing relevance?

Some educators have recognized this. There are schools that have moved away from classically defined Jewish knowledge. Their curriculum is not organized around Tanakh or Mishnah, but around topics and themes. These schools offer courses in Judaism and the Environment, Judaism and Freedom, Judaism and Kindness, etc. The thinking behind this curriculum is that if we can demonstrate to students that their personal values are also found in Judaism; we can create, rather than compel, relevance.

But a thematic curriculum is not the perfect solution. First, it disenfranchises the more traditional student who is looking for

classical texts. Can pluralism exist if a school attracts only Jews from a narrow range of practice and belief? Second, it also assumes an ideal. The environment is assumed to be a universal ideal, and Jewish texts are selected to support this ideal. But the existence of an “ideal,” any ideal, is essentialism, just packaged differently. The thematic curriculum often skews Jewish sources heavily toward a liberal ideal, at the expense of careful engagement with the text on its own terms.

Finally, this type of organization creates what Brad Hirschfeld calls “Paint by Numbers” or what I refer to as “connect-the-dot Judaism.” Some universally accepted truth is found to be supported by Jewish texts, and the job of the learner is to connect a series of out-of-context short text selections. “Torah learning” degenerates into waiting for the teacher to present the next series of dots. Creative thinking and a personalized identity becomes almost impossible in this model.

Educators committed to pluralistic education are thus presented with a dilemma. An ideal connected to classical texts can limit a student’s self-expression and autonomy. Yet an ideal connected to “universal” values does the same thing. As soon as one says, “This is what one must do, believe, espouse or accept to be Jewish,” one disenfranchises those who disagree.

Today, pluralistic educators accept Bethamie Horowitz’s idea that there are multiple Jewish journeys. These Jewish journeys are incredibly diverse, both internally and externally. As pluralistic educators we seek to encourage those journeys, not stifle them. Today, no one would argue that there exists an essentially defined ideal Jew, a single path that one must follow. Yet, if there is no single ideal, what goal are we educating to? Does our discomfort with essentialism then force us, as critics of pluralism argue, into a limbo of relativism?

The solution lies in realizing that pluralism is not merely an environment, method or outcome. Rather, pluralism is an epistemology. Pluralism is a way of making sense of and understanding reality. This way of knowing is grounded in postmodernism and is rooted in a sophisticated understanding of, and relationship with, text.

As Franz Rosenzweig said, “Modernity is the secularization of Christianity.” Modernism, like Christianity, advanced that there was one truth unfolding in the world. Faith in the trinity was replaced by faith in a positivist causal model of nature. In the positivist model, there exists one truth. The job of the teacher was to convey that truth to students.

I would argue that postmodernism is the secularization of Judaism. Jews never accepted the concept inherent in Solo Scriptura, that there is one true message in biblical texts. Jewish tradition says that there are multiple truths embedded in the text, at least *shivim panim laTorah*, 70 faces that relay meaning. Words for Jews have always had multiple meanings, and these meanings were conveyed through the lens of a cultural tradition of textual interpretation.

The postmodern world has internalized the Jewish understanding of text. There no longer exists a “right” way to interpret reality. It is not just that we tolerate multiple narratives. Rather, the whole concept of the metanarrative, a rational explanation of how the world works, has been judged and found wanting. Hegel, Freud and Marx have all seen their ideas crash against the chaos of a complex reality. Every cognitive model, every narrative, that we can develop to describe reality is merely that, a cognitive model. There is no ontological all-encompassing truth to be uncovered.

An entire field of Curriculum Theory has arisen to defend teaching against the modernist trend of elaborate testing toward a single ideal, and to reintroduce craft and creativity. As William Pinar,



a leading proponent of Curriculum Theory, says, “Curriculum is not a destination. It is a process, a complicated conversation rather than a debate.” The question “What knowledge is of most worth?” cannot be answered for others. Pinar asserts that “without the agency of subjectivity, education evaporates and is replaced by the conformity compelled by scripted curricula and standardized tests.” Agency is impossible in an environment of carefully crafted connect-the-dot lesson plans. Curriculum Theory calls on teachers to avoid tailored minute-by-minute scripts and decontextualized cognitive puzzles. If the goal of teaching is to bring students to a “right answer,” to drag their minds across a cognitive finish line, then the true essence of pluralism has been lost.

How does the educator create agency for students? Ted Aoki calls on educators to give them air.

I have seen amazing presentations of pedagogical content knowledge, classes implementing varied techniques to address multiple intelligences. Some even covered different narratives. But there was no room for the students to breathe. Each narrative, each conclusion was laid out by the teacher. The only perspective that the student could come up with was one of those that the teacher had presented. The experience is exhausting and it leaves little room for creative thinking.

Central to pluralism is the idea that the world is not positivistic. There exists no truth that needs to be uncovered. Rather, truth is something that is developed in a process, a hermeneutic relationship between reader and text. Textual study is not something that is done. It is something that we as Jews, we as sophisticated learners, do.

Pluralistic education needs more conversation and less debate. In a pluralism grounded in postmodernism, there is no need to constantly forge consensus. Pluralism exists when the viewpoint, and approach, of the minority is given space. Space is created when we allow people to be. Students do not always want to be forced to defend a position. Do we?

In studies of denominational affiliation, few teachers were able to articulate the beliefs of their movement. If rabbis and teachers are not able to accurately describe and defend an approach, why should we expect this behavior of students?

So where does that leave the pluralistic Jewish educator trying to create a curriculum? We arrive back where we started and a relationship with classical texts. Curriculum Theory calls for education to become complicated conversations centered around texts. Don't give excerpts or provide selections out of context. Give the whole text with all of its inherent contradictions and questions. Let students chew and digest their own thoughts. Allow students to create their own meaning. Realize full well that this created meaning will not be static.

There is no such thing as an educated Jew. The traditional question isn't “What do you know?” but “What are you learning?” If learning becomes something rooted in the past, merely an adjective, then we, as Jewish educators have failed. There is a reason that we, as Jews, read the Torah again every year. Each year we look at the material with fresh eyes. We draw out a new understanding.

This is also the reason that traditionally Torah study is incumbent on everyone. Each person is unique, and the perspective that each brings to Torah understanding is unique. Give your students room to breathe. Give them room to be unique and create their own understanding. If done properly, study will cease to be something done before an exam and it will be, as it always has been, a fixture of Jewish intellectual life.

### HoSPEP Midyear Conference Review

By Cooki Levy, Program Director

Almost thirty fellows and deans of the RAVSAK Head of School Professional Excellence Project gathered in New York City during three very cold January days to discuss, debate and divulge the secrets of the professional lives of heads of Jewish day schools from across the United States and Canada. All three cohorts were well represented at the conference. The discussions were enriched when first-year heads could hear the reflections of those now in their third year—the lessons they learned and the challenges they no longer face. In a series of fruitful and informative sessions, the participants explored the multifaceted role of the visionary head of school. They looked at the school leader as Jewish educator, as change agent, as administrative leader, as fundraiser, admissions officer, marketing director and guide to the board of directors.

Sessions were led both by our cadre of outstanding deans who serve as coaches to the HoS PEP cohort, and by the many talented heads of school in attendance. The participants felt enriched by the discussions, and by the opportunity to reconnect and bond with others from across the continent who hold the same positions in a variety of communities. Key to the success of the convening was the understanding that spending time with peers, sharing experiences, challenges and successes removes the sense of isolation that heads of school sometimes feel. Both very large and very small schools were represented, as were schools from differing ideological perspectives. But participants concluded that there is far more that they have in common than that sets them apart, first and foremost a commitment to Jewish education and to the larger Jewish community.

We are grateful to the AVI CHAI Foundation and other generous funders for enabling us to offer this unique learning opportunity to HoSPEP participants. Great thanks go, as well, to our exceptional deans, and to all who took part. Their contributions enabled us to have very rich conversations and very deep learning, mixed with relaxed camaraderie. All returned home with a renewed sense of purpose along with some very concrete ideas for achieving their and their schools' goals.



# WHAT STICKS?

Jewish literacy and curriculum require a tremendous amount of thought and work by day school faculty and administrators, day by day, year by year. In this article, we asked four recent alumni to look back over their day school experience and summarize what remains with them now. What lessons, skills, examples, practices or texts that they learned in school do they find still relevant, still playing a role in their thoughts, studies and pursuits today?

## Emma Maier

Milken Community High School  
Los Angeles, Class of 2014

It's 2 o'clock on a Tuesday afternoon and I'm sitting in Rabbi David Ellenson's Brandeis classroom, discussing issues of American and Israeli Jewish identity, conversion and boundary maintenance. The lecture, and anecdotal jokes, proceed as usual, until we are asked a question about the core texts we study when discussing conversion. "Yevamot 47b!" pops into my head, as I recall the lengthy study we did on conversion during my eleventh grade Integrated Jewish ethics class.

Recalling the Milken classroom is not a one time occurrence during my time at Brandeis. Be it in a class on inter-religious mysticism, teaching sixth grade Hebrew school, or leading davening in Kehilat Sha'ar, Brandeis's traditional, non-denominational, egalitarian prayer group, I am always brought back to the learning we did in the Milken classroom and community. Though these connections are often academically based, they are also rooted in the skills and values that Milken fostered within each student. At Milken, we were not taught what to think, but rather how to think. We learned how to look at texts critically, how to wrestle with God, and how to have an open heart and mind.

Both inside and outside the classroom we explored what it meant to create a kehilah kedoshah, a holy community—in body and in mind, in spirit and in reality. In eleventh grade, I was working to plan Friday night Shabbat services for an all-grade Shabbaton. The services were supposed to be "pluralistic" and inclusive of the entirely diverse community. I tried hard to think of a service model that would accommodate the entire community, but was completely stumped. Some only sang Carlebach melodies, some only knew Debbie Friedman tunes, and some could barely read a word of Hebrew while others were fluent. I turned to Rabbi Neal

Scheindlin, my teacher and mentor, and asked him how it was possible to take this diverse community and create an inclusive and pluralistic prayer space where everyone felt comfortable. To which he replied, "Pluralism means everyone is a little bit uncomfortable."

Rabbi Scheindlin took my question and taught me how to reframe my thinking. I was focused on the specific idea of accommodating everyone, but I needed to bring the critical thinking skills learned in the classroom into the community. It was crucial to understand that pluralism does not necessarily mean comfort. We as community members needed to reconcile our differences and sit without discomfort in order to create a more holy community.

My learning and experience creating pluralistic community at Milken continue inspiring my work at Brandeis. I am currently the co-chair of Kehilat Sha'ar, where I strive to shape sacred, pluralistic spaces in which everyone is valued for their unique Jewish path. In the Kehilat Sha'ar model, we believe that traditionally observant parameters serve as a common denominator in communal spaces. In the Sha'ar community, some are not used to egalitarianism, while others are less familiar with traditional liturgy. This discomfort brings a wide range of Jewish community members together and creates a unique Jewish space on the Brandeis campus.

Milken provided me with the infrastructure to understand the challenges and beauty of pluralism, and to think about these issues in unconventional ways. It is because of the diverse challenges and makeup of the Milken community that I am positioned to lead the Sha'ar community today. Ultimately, I aspire to become a cantor and rabbi. Throughout my future years of learning, it is my intention to carry with me the value of being challenged, the spirit of Jewish pluralism, and the pursuit of questioning that was fostered by the Milken community.

## Aaron Friedland

King David High School  
Vancouver, Class of 2010

When I think back to my King David High School experience, I can characterize my entire five years with one word: chesed, or kindness.

I was taught kindness and pride from our remarkable custodian Jesse who would always





## RAVSAK Hebrew Badge Project

This spring, Hebrew teachers from ten Jewish day schools across North America are piloting the RAVSAK Hebrew Badge Project in a middle school Hebrew language class. Generously supported by Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah, the RAVSAK Hebrew Badge Project aims to elevate the importance of Hebrew language in Jewish day schools—motivating, encouraging, and celebrating student engagement in the authentic use of Hebrew.

With guidance from their teachers, middle school students will have the opportunity to earn digital badges for designing, creating and presenting a project in Hebrew. Each badge is aligned with a Jewish sensibility, such as *Ke-hillah* (community), *Gemilut Chesed* (bestowing kindness) and *Simcha* (joy), allowing teachers to integrate Jewish studies and values into the Hebrew classroom. All projects will emphasize both receptive Hebrew (reading and listening) and expressive Hebrew (speaking and writing). The aim of the Hebrew Badge Project is for students to demonstrate understanding in Hebrew and creatively and capably express themselves in Hebrew to others.

Part of the badge-earning process involves sharing the project with an audience, either within the school or the broader Jewish community. This audience includes an online community of students and teachers at Jewish day schools across North America, through a digital platform called Nipagesh. Teachers are receiving guidance from experts in the fields of digital badging, including Sarah Blattner, founder and executive director of Tamritz, and Myrna Rubel, middle school principal at the Epstein School, a day school that has pioneered integrating digital badging into the curriculum.

For more information about the Hebrew Badge Project, and to learn about joining the cohort in the 2016-17 school year, please contact Yael Steiner at [yael@ravsak.org](mailto:yael@ravsak.org).



smile, and offer a warm remark. I was shown kindness from our librarian Ms. Stibravy, who would encourage my curiosity for the African continent. And finally, I was shown and taught kindness by my teacher Shoshana Burton, who has played a profound role in shaping my current trajectory. Shoshi inspired students. Intentionally or not, she inspired us to grab onto what was being taught in various classes and apply them to chesed projects both local and international in nature.

On one occasion, Shoshi invited JJ Keki, a Jewish coffee farmer from Uganda to share his remarkable story with King David High School. Mr. Keki had witnessed the atrocities at the World Trade Center and he recognized that it was vital for him to collaborate with his Christian and Muslim counterparts to improve relations and ensure that such events would not take place in Uganda. He founded Delicious Peace, an interfaith coffee cooperative which united the Christian, Muslim and Jewish farmers of the region. Not only did this unification increase interfaith tolerance and awareness, it also helped to increase economic prosperity for the farmers, including the Jewish Abayudaya farmers.

After hearing JJ Keki speak, a connection was formed. The following year, I left for McGill University and over winter break, my family as well as family friends of ours travelled to rural

Mbale, Uganda. I was incredibly fortunate to have this experience as it helped me to find meaning in my economics studies and apply my newfound knowledge to causes I was passionate about.

During this visit, I experienced firsthand the distance that students had to journey to get to school. These children, my counterparts, were traveling upwards of five kilometers to and from school to access the same education that I and my North American peers too frequently took for granted. While these students' persistence had helped them overcome distance, their lack of adequate food made learning difficult, which was clear to me then as well as on subsequent visits.

Another realization which was made clear while spending time with the three faith-based schools was that these students lacked the same safety net that I had been afforded.

As a dyslexic student, I struggled academically. In the North American context, I had to overcome a great deal to be where I am today. I was fortunate to have incredible parents who recognized the problem and addressed it. Once again, I was shown kindness. I had teachers adjust their styles and techniques to accommodate me. The proverb "It takes a village to raise a child" couldn't be more true. I was incredibly lucky to be that child.

By contrast, from my travels in countries such as South Africa, Uganda, India and Barbados, I've



seen that students with learning challenges often do not get the same opportunities I was blessed with. Those students often are put to work with little hopes of escaping the poverty trap.

My experiences led me to create an organization called The Walking School Bus ([thewalkingschoolbus.com](http://thewalkingschoolbus.com)), which aims to provide the same safety net that I was afforded—one that empowers access to education, improves curriculum, and ensures nutrition. Five years ago, I began writing a children's book of the same name, the proceeds of which will all go to supporting educational opportunities in Africa. Schools can get involved as well ([thewalkingschoolbus.com/our-reading-program](http://thewalkingschoolbus.com/our-reading-program)). Volunteers read and record chapters of books in the public domain; these recordings are then sent to our partnered schools with the attached PDFs or physical copies. Students in our partnered schools have the opportunity to listen and read simultaneously. This works as a great teaching tool, impresses proper pronunciation onto our students, and fosters peer-to-peer community and kindness. If you would like to get involved with our project and help flip the current reality of educational attainment on its head, join our [#TWSBflipsaccess2ed](https://www.facebook.com/flippingaccess2education) movement here: [thewalkingschoolbus.com/flippingaccess2education](http://thewalkingschoolbus.com/flippingaccess2education), and feel free to submit your own photo on social media or via email.

It is an honor for me to be in a position to give back to students who lack access to education and nutrition. Through The Walking School Bus, I hope to spread the same kindness that was shown to me and positively impact students in our partnered communities.

## Emily Goldberg

Abraham Joshua Heschel School  
New York, Class of 2014

"The white on the page is just as important as the dark on the page."

This teaching implicitly and explicitly echoed throughout the hallways of Heschel High School. My Jewish day school, perhaps like many, valued Jewish text and its myriad layers and perspectives. Our curricula throughout high school compelled us to use text as the binoculars for our respective journeys that were interwoven inside and outside of our school's four walls. From dissecting sugyot in tractate Sanhedrin to debating Thoreau's idea of transcendentalism, my classmates and I were expected to read every inch of any document. The words and empty spaces alike equally overflowed with opportunity.

I remember my first experience in my Tanakh class, an in-depth study of 1 Samuel led by a post-denominational and deeply religious teacher. His tattoo of the sefirotic elements on his palm glistened as he dissuaded his students from using

English translations of the Bible in our learning community. Why? "I'd much rather hear your own interpretations. If I wanted a translation of Torah that silenced your organic ideas, then I wouldn't be teaching," he chuckled, as though the idea of sixteen-year olds taking ownership of biblical text was obvious. It was not obvious to me. I clung desperately to every English word and tutorial until they eventually dissolved beneath the questions that transcended their basic functions. What is the author not saying? How does Samuel's relationship with kingship and authority relate to my understanding of God? What do I think of the narratives written before me?

Soon, my Tanakh of sacred text became my canvas, covered not with copied ideas but rather my own endless questions and bold claims. Before I graduated high school, I had learned that the words on every page of text were not simply artifacts to understand; they enveloped an open invitation for me to engage in honest and limitless conversation with my faith. The white perimeter on every page of Tanakh, each daf of Talmud, and every scene in Shakespeare's plays challenged me to think critically, write without filters, and, most importantly, discover a voice of my own. No question, doubt or idea was too radical for my text to hold, but in order for them to be taken seriously, I must hold my voice just as accountable as that of Samuel, Rashi and Othello. I must root my voice in the textual conversations that breathe new life into Jewish learning.

The white on the page is just as important as the dark on the page. The words printed before my eyes are simply the first step of a lifelong conversation. When I choose to read text openly and vulnerably, my voice becomes as an active participant. My Jewish day school channeled its love of text into the students, molding us to become the unpublished, uncensored and unbound thinkers that ask the radical questions in college and beyond. Beneath these ideas that are etched onto the whiteness of our holy literature—ready to break ground and pursue a world as we see it ought to be—exists a grounded and unwavering commitment to the black words on every page.

## Meredith Leon

Bernard Zell Anshe Emet Day School  
Chicago, Class of 2011

It is so rare to come across a place that you can return to years later and feel as though you never left. BZAEDS, the day school I spent the most transformative eleven years of my life, embodies this place for me and for thousands of alumni. A day school experience is unlike any other education because the school becomes a part of you, teaching students how to be critical thinkers, upstanders and members of the Jewish community.

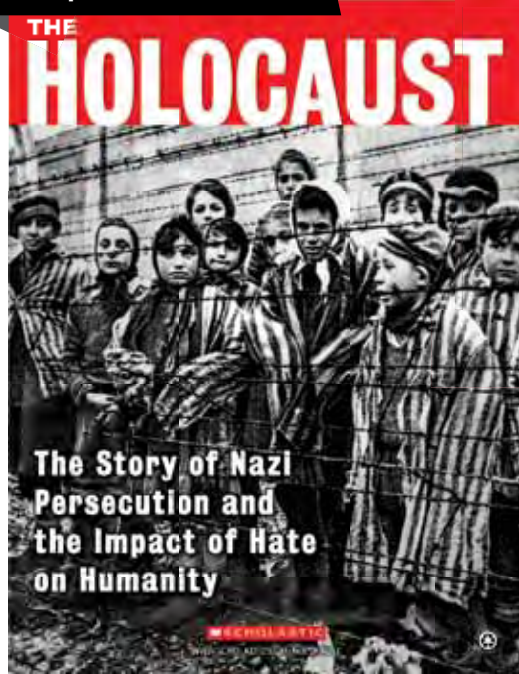
My teachers at BZAEDS taught me so much more than multiplication, American history, the stages of photosynthesis, and Hebrew. They went beyond the standard by taking students on field trips to illustrate the course material's impact on society, and bringing in speakers that inspired us to question our world. We were assigned projects that challenged our minds and creativity, from curating mini-museum exhibitions to writing a diary from the perspective a figure in the French Revolution. My day-school education taught me how to think, and when I went on to high school, where I was often taught to a test, the importance of having a progressive learning experience was crystalized.

Being in a small environment, where students will inevitably form tight-knit bonds with one another and the faculty, fosters a unique sense of community that remains strong for years. I made my life-long best friends at BZAEDS and continue to visit to see teachers whom I had from nursery to eighth grade. It was truly amazing to see how the entire school—students, teachers and parents—came together for my family when my uncle passed away, and I don't think the support we received would have been possible at any other school.

Most importantly, BZAEDS laid the foundation of Judaism in my life through teaching me Jewish traditions, text, culture and history. BZAEDS gave me the unbelievable opportunity to culminate my Jewish studies by traveling to Israel with my eighth grade class. When I went off to high school and was faced with anti-Israel sentiments in my class, I had the experience and knowledge to stand up for Israel, and took it a step further by joining an Israel advocacy group through Chicago's Federation. Now, I am a freshman in college at USC, and have gotten very involved with USC's Hillel. Joining USC's Jewish life made my transition across the country so easy, and I have really found my place in it through attending Shabbat dinners, helping plan Jewish social events, and being a member of Trojans for Israel. It was BZAEDS that engrained in me the necessity of seeking out Jewish communities no matter where life takes me, because the future success of the Jewish people lies in the hands of my generation.



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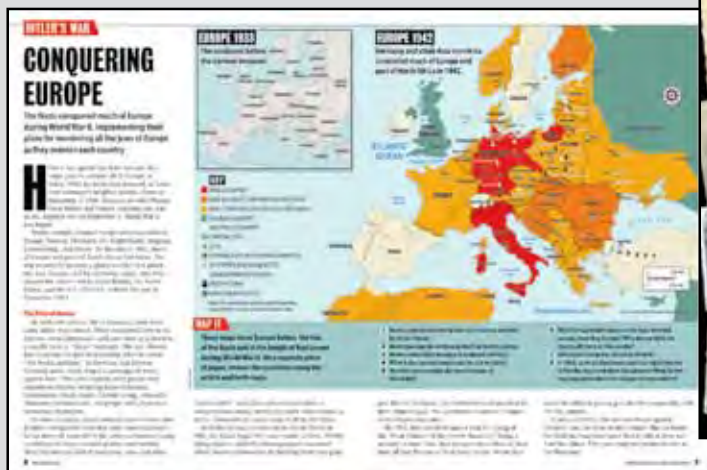
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SARAH  
LEVY

# JEWISH LITERACY VERSUS JEWISH IDENTITY

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## TEACHERS' REFLECTIONS

Over the last several decades, many authors have attempted to define and assess Jewish literacy and identity. Jewish day school teachers find themselves at the forefront of these conversations every day, as they craft their curricula and interact with students.

As part of a recent study, I met individually with Jewish studies teachers at pluralistic day schools, asking them questions about their goals as teachers and what they hoped to impart to their students. Our discussions included the topics of both Jewish identity and Jewish literacy, but while all teachers interviewed emphasized the importance of cultivating in students a strong Jewish identity, only about half of them described Jewish literacy as a pathway to the development of Jewish identity.

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## HIGHLIGHTING LITERACY

One teacher envisioned Jewish literacy as a primary goal of her work as a Jewish educator. "I think our goal is to create Jews who are literate and are comfortable with their literacy. Certainly I want to have students who comfortably identify as Jews, however they grow their Jewish identity. Whether it's through being a great philanthropist, through synagogue or community affiliation, or anything else, that they are not just bagels-and-cream-cheese Jews. So that they are knowledgeable about why they are identifying as Jews. That doesn't necessarily mean preventing intermarriage, or having someone who is going to put on tefillin every day, but it's much more about understanding for themselves why they are Jewish and why they want the Jewish community to continue."

When asked to elaborate and define "literacy," the teacher added, "There are all kinds of literacy. Some of the more practical forms of literacy are students' familiarity with forms of prayer and the

lifecycle, so that, if they, God forbid, lost a family member, even if they haven't experienced it before, they would understand how they could apply Jewish learning to this life event.

Being literate also means that students will understand Jewish terms, have a certain sense of Jewish history, and identify with Israel. Literacy is understanding the foundations of Rabbinic Judaism so that when somebody says to them, 'Come to my seder,' they understand that this is a historical moment that they are a part of, and it's a historical moment that has developed through time. So, being literate is being able to practice or not practice Judaism, but whatever choices students make, they're making them from a certain knowledge base."

Through her statements, this teacher clearly prioritizes Jewish literacy, but also connects her vision of Jewish literacy to that of Jewish identity, showing how literacy is a path to create a deeper, more connected and more knowledgeable form of identity in her students.

Another teacher interviewed similarly emphasized Jewish literacy, saying that one of his goals as an instructor is "definitely Jewish knowledge, and when I say Jewish knowledge, it's a combination of Jewish texts. It's Tanakh and it's Torah she-be'al peh concepts. Something needs to show after being in day school for 12 years or sometimes even longer. ... Students cannot just walk out and say, 'Oh, I just know English and math and nothing in Judaism or Jewish studies.' If that's the case, they could have received their education from a secular preparatory school, so there's something to be said that they have to have Jewish knowledge.

"I think that every student should be exposed to Hebrew and should be able to understand simple texts in Hebrew, and maybe say a few sentences in Hebrew. The other key area of Jewish knowledge I think is Israel. The students should know about Jewish history dating back to medieval and biblical times. It all fits into the identity of who the Jewish people are—students who leave Jewish day schools should be a part of the Jewish people."

This teacher distinguishes Jewish day school from secular private school both through the subject matter studied and the way that content is used—for students to understand their place in Jewish history and the connection to other Jews throughout time and space. For him and the first teacher, Jewish literacy is a clear goal, but mainly for its impact on identity.

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## HIGHLIGHTING IDENTITY

Although all of the teachers valued Jewish tradition and Jewish text, some, such as those already mentioned, prioritized Jewish literacy's value in and of itself, and also saw it as a critical tool to foster and enforce Jewish identity. Others, however, valued Jewish literacy primarily as a vehicle to instill Jewish identity, without aiming to achieve a level of Jewish literacy in their students.

One teacher did not mention Jewish literacy as a goal at all, describing his methodology rather as "using Jewish studies as a way to explore [student] identity and relate to the rest of the world." During his interview, he did mention some of the same elements of literacy, such as familiarity with terms and lifecycle events, as measures he uses to gauge his success as a teacher, although he considers such measures to be measures of Jewish identity rather than Jewish literacy.

Another teacher stated that teaching in a Jewish day school "is building [students'] souls. Let them take these thoughts where they choose because that's what the Talmud is, and that's what the responsa is, and that is what the Tosefta is. This is true

Judaism—letting them think creatively." Although she was less interested in listing specific measures of success for Jewish identity, her wording in her answers references Jewish texts, and, during her interview, when discussing her methodology, she discussed how she loves to use biblical stories as a backdrop for students to explore their own identities.

Although neither of these teachers claim to prioritize Jewish literacy, their discussion of their goals and methodologies make clear that they consider Jewish literacy as a conduit to Jewish identity, using Jewish texts and Jewish history as a way for students to explore their own identities and examine how they connect with others in the Jewish community.

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## CONCLUSIONS

The following conclusions can be drawn regarding the connections teachers make between Jewish literacy and Jewish identity.

### **Jewish identity and Jewish literacy are inherently connected.**

Although many day school teachers do not include Jewish literacy among their stated priorities or goals, they do see Jewish literacy as the main way to instill Jewish identity in their students. Literacy seems to be an often unspoken yet highly prioritized goal for teachers. As such, Jewish literacy should be infused throughout the school rather than relegated to the Jewish studies department. If one of the goals of the Jewish day school is to foster Jewish identity, and Jewish literacy is a favored path through which to accomplish this goal, the goal of Jewish literacy (as it connects to Jewish identity) should be prioritized by the school as a whole.

**Jewish identity is the primary goal, with Jewish literacy used as the vehicle to accomplish that goal.** While only about half of the teacher participants discussed Jewish literacy as a goal, all of the teacher participants mentioned Jewish identity as a goal. Even those who listed literacy as a goal, when probed regarding their reasons, connected literacy to identity. Jewish literacy, then, is seen by teachers as a tool with which to foster and strengthen Jewish identity. With this in mind, the curriculum of the school should reflect the interests and needs of the students, allowing them the space and Jewish resources to grapple with the issues they are facing.

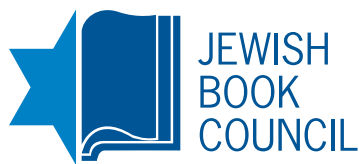
**Just as Jewish identity is difficult to define and assess, so too is the concept of Jewish literacy.** Among the teachers who listed Jewish literacy as a goal for their students, definitions of "Jewish literacy" differed from teacher to teacher. Teachers seemed to define Jewish literacy based on factors from their own education or history and what they had found to be most interesting to students or most successful in engaging students. Therefore, rather than working with a preset corpus of texts, teachers should be encouraged to determine for themselves which elements of the Jewish canon they would like to incorporate into their classes, choosing sources or elements with which they deeply connect and can most successfully use to engage students.

Based on this research, Jewish day school teachers aim for their students, through studying the Mishnah and Rashi, to be able to place themselves in the chain of textual interpretation. They aim for their students, through the study of Hebrew and review of Jewish history, to understand the greater struggle that has faced Israel over the last many decades, making their first trips to the land that much more meaningful. Most importantly, they aim for their students, by studying Tanakh, Talmud and Halakhah, to understand what being Jewish means, beyond eating latkes on Chanukah and dressing up on Purim. All of this requires the intersection, not the separation, of Jewish literacy and Jewish identity.

# TRANSLATION

## A LIVING CONVERSATION

Interview with Aviya Kushner, author of *The Grammar of God: A Journey Into the Words and Worlds of the Bible*. This interview is published in partnership with the Jewish Book Council.



Tell us about your own Jewish education.

I grew up speaking Hebrew at home. My mother is Israeli, and my parents made a commitment to speak only Hebrew; this was a huge gift and the foundation of my education. I attended Bais Ya'akov in Monsey, New York, then ASHAR through the eighth grade, and Ramaz for high school. I later worked as a reporter in Jerusalem, which was its own education!

I've been writing about Jewish literature for more than a decade, and I learned a lot from the writers and translators I interviewed, and from the many books on Jewish history, literature, and culture that I reviewed. Currently, I translate Hebrew poetry and prose, and so my education is continuing.

One of the striking things about the Bible-Tanakh is that Jews and Christians read essentially the same book but get very different things out of it. What did your study of Bible translations teach you about differences or similarities between Jews and Christians?

One thing Jews and Christians share is a fascination with the Bible. For the most part, Jews and Christians agree on the plot of the Bible—the exodus from Egypt, for example, appeared in every Bible I looked at.

But English translations of the Bible tend to sound more definite than the Hebrew, which is sometimes ambiguous and wild, and often multiple in meaning. Many difficult passages are flattened in English, so what is problematic in Hebrew becomes neat and easy in English.

Then there's the commentary factor. Many Christian translations do not include commentary; by contrast, a Hebrew reader using the Mikraot Gedolot can easily access many views of the same text.

Some Christian translations have headings and layout that frame thinking, like the heading "The Ten Commandments." Meanwhile, Jewish scholars are busy arguing over what the ten are, or what a *dibrah* even is!

And of course, there are plenty of individual translation choices that deeply influence the reader's worldview. It's definitely a rich topic for discussion.

Talk about why knowing the Hebrew is so important. What gets lost in translation?

For starters, in Biblical Hebrew, nouns, verbs, and adjectives are related through common three-letter roots that create echoes and connections across the entire Tanakh. These connections are practically impossible to hear without knowing Hebrew. The English reader simply misses out.

Then there are specific losses, such as names. In English, names are transliterated, not translated, and the English reader has no idea that people's names and place names have such rich meanings. It's a loss to read the Bible without understanding the tie between *adam* and *adamah*, or man and earth, and without knowing what Ya'akov and Yitzchak mean.

I could go on, but I'll summarize by saying that the biggest loss is grammar. Hebrew and English have different sentence structures and word structures, and these do not translate well. What is at stake is an entire way of thinking, a system of structuring thought, and perhaps a way of understanding the world.

Your book has the word "grammar" in the title, and you spend much of the book focusing on ways that grammar shapes our understanding of the Bible's meaning. Give day school teachers an argument why, and how, they should teach biblical Hebrew grammar.

Mastering grammar is the difference between a vague or general understanding of what's going on and a close and intimate understanding. Grammar allows a student to pinpoint the exact meaning of particular Hebrew words.

Ideally, teaching grammar will include instruction in both word structure and sentence structure. Students should understand how Hebrew words are formed and how they interact in a sentence or *pasuk*.

Commentators can also be helpful in the battle to explain why grammar matters. Avraham Ibn Ezra, for example, often turns to grammar to make his points, and his arguments are fascinating.



### When students read Jewish texts in translation, what should they look for?

When reading in translation, I recommend reading in the plural. Read more than one translation, and if possible, translations from different centuries and traditions.

When you read multiple translations, you can feel what the problematic passages are, and you can also see how attitudes changed over time, which will give you a better sense of the different potential readings. It's fascinating to see the differences between the 1917 Jewish Publication Society translation and the 1985 JPS edition.

One thing to look for is a translator's introduction. The Jewish Publication Society has a book called *Notes on the Translation of the Torah*, which can offer students a window into the translation problems the committee had. I also learned a lot from Everett Fox's introductions to his translations. Robert Alter's notes on his translation of the Psalms are terrific, too.

### Are there ways that translations can enhance our understanding of the source text?

Absolutely. In Jewish history, we are fortunate—many of our translators, like Sa'adiah Gaon and Martin Buber, were also major scholars. Every translation is an interpretation, and certainly the interpretation of giants enhances our understanding.

A translator is first and foremost a reader. Just as reading with a brilliant teacher is valuable, so reading an outstanding translation can be incredibly enriching.

A good translation can make an ancient text come alive for a contemporary reader, and it can also highlight the richness of a text. For example, I enjoyed seeing how recent translators have grappled

with the word *adam* in the Tanakh. Some say "man" and some say "human." The translation of *adam* as "human" tries to capture that *adam* in Hebrew is both an individual man, Adam, and mankind, or perhaps, humankind.

### Do you have a favorite Bible translation?

I think there are beautiful moments in many biblical translations.

I was especially moved by Everett Fox's Schocken Bible, because he makes such a tremendous effort to capture the sound of the Hebrew.

### What advice do you have for Jewish day schools, especially for Jewish studies teachers?

My advice is to emphasize Hebrew, and to give it more time in the class day. I may be biased, but I think Jewish writers can really help make traditional Jewish texts come alive.

I recommend including Hebrew literature in Jewish education, because many of our best writers—like Agnon and Amichai—weave in all kinds of Jewish texts and make them contemporary. The idea is to make Hebrew and Jewish text and history exciting, immediate and relevant, and great writers specialize in that.

Perhaps a class on Tanakh could also include an example of how Amichai borrows a line, and a Mishnah or Gemara teacher could show how Agnon threads in some of that language in his stories. It's important for students to see that Jewish text is a centuries-long, living conversation that connects all of us to the past and continues to define our present. It's a beautiful conversation, and I hope that with the help of Jewish day schools, it will live on.

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# EMBRACING THE PRACTICAL



MIRIAM HELLER STERN

In 1969, University of Chicago Professor Joseph Schwab famously declared the field of curriculum “moribund.” Textbooks and lists of great works alone did not adequately construct well-designed architectures for teaching and learning. Educational theories deriving singularly from academic research in psychology or philosophy in Schwab’s view underserved curriculum development, leaving the enterprise “desperately in search of new and more effective principles and methods.”

Luckily for future generations, in the same breath Schwab also led a charge toward “a renaissance” in curriculum design. When deciding what to teach and why, he called upon educators to take “practical” considerations into account, including the needs and interests of students, the diverse settings and communities in which they were learning, the uses and nuances of the subject matter, and the skills and orientations of the teachers. But the term “practical” here should not be confused for “simple,” for Schwab was arguing that the curriculum designer must synthesize multiple areas of expertise.

Schwab’s now classic call for change has not lost any of its power. Curriculum materials may have evolved over the decades, from textbooks and handwritten notes to shelves full of binders and now to digital media. Scholarship in every discipline has multiplied, and the canons of cultural literacy have largely been revised and expanded. We have more content from which to choose and more varied tools at our disposal. Now more than ever, educators need to master the art of deciding how and when to use them.

The idea that curriculum should take into account the multiple priorities of teaching, including the subject, the students, the context and the teacher makes intuitive sense, right? Then why are so many teachers still coming up with their own plans for presenting language arts or Bible, scrambling to pull together resources from various online repositories, or struggling to design lessons that deliver benchmarks and goals? And why is it so challenging for schools to introduce new curricula?

Leading a renaissance in curriculum is hard and complex work. Schwab suggested that weaving together the various priorities of a curriculum is an art form, not a simple formula. Here are some recommendations for how we might support good educators in pursuing Schwab’s vision of “The Practical” in curriculum design.

## Address Resistance

A few years ago, I asked a well-respected head of school who was preparing for retirement what he viewed as the biggest challenge of his successful career in administration. I was sure he would point to fundraising or cultivating a great teaching staff. His response took me by surprise: “implementing the new math curriculum.”

This leader was no stranger to shepherding change, but curriculum decisions reveal deeply held beliefs about subject matter, teaching and learners. Unfortunately, sometimes educators are motivated by nostalgia and autobiography, and they resist trying models that diverge from how they were taught. One might experience the same reaction from parents, who expect their children’s curricula to have the familiarity of a relic of their own childhood (even if they hated it or cannot recall what they learned). Students sense adult resistance, which impacts their trust and motivation. Communicating a multi-faceted rationale for the curriculum creates the possibility of a shared belief in the new plan for teaching.

## Create a Brain Trust

Creative, out-of-the-box thinking happens when people have the opportunity to brainstorm, to debate possibilities, and to devise adaptive solutions to challenges as they arise. Good curriculum design, Schwab argued, involves deliberation. With so many factors determining what we ought to teach, various points of view and alternatives must be considered. What types of literacy does our school value, and how will students develop proficiency or fluency? Where in the curriculum should we reinforce habits of mind such as interpretation, evidence and argument? When should covering essential subject matter take priority, and when should students “having wonderful ideas” (to use Eleanor Duckworth’s phrase) be a driving force in the curriculum? Schwab’s call for multiple voices of expertise around the planning table foreshadowed the design thinking approach that innovators are advocating for today.

Research has shown that teachers crave time for professional collaboration, and many do not have it in adequate measure. Stanford Professor emeritus Linda Darling-Hammond has led a national crusade to improve teaching through collaboration. The most successful schools build in time in the school day for faculty to co-plan. This time is not just to coordinate their schedules or check in about students (although these are important), but to engage in an iterative process of strategizing about complicated decisions. Outside of school hours, intensive workshops where educators can deepen their subject matter knowledge and collaborate with colleagues provide valuable input from beyond the walls of their own schools.

## Engage a Good Coach

To paraphrase the old saying often attributed to heavyweight champion boxer Joe Louis, “Everybody has a plan, until they’ve been hit.” Coming up with a smart curriculum, while essential, does not guarantee successful teaching. Often, really innovative approaches to curricula fail not because they were lacking in promise but because stakeholders could not stomach waiting out the inevitable “rookie” mistakes. Some schools are opting to move professional development dollars away from schoolwide one-off presentations with generic applicability and toward more targeted coaching to improve the implementation of innovative curricula.

Much like an athletic coach, a curriculum coach who has expertise in the goals, subject and methods of the curriculum can amplify effectiveness. A coach who visits the classroom periodically and reflects back with a teacher about intentions and outcomes can help a teacher regroup when things don’t go quite as planned. It’s not enough to hand teachers a playbook and then abandon them during the game. Teachers who feel supported are more likely to succeed.

A renaissance in curriculum is possible. We must recognize that doing what is “practical” is actually sophisticated, not simple, work.

# LITERACY AND CURRICULUM IN OUR SCHOOLS

*“Rabbi Yishmael says, One who learns Torah in order to teach is granted to learn and teach. One who learns in order to do, is granted to learn and to teach, to observe and do.” Pirkei Avot 4:5*

As this famous rabbinic expression suggests, when a person learns for the sake of doing, the learning is remembered and internalized in a way that is deep, impactful and long-lasting. Day schools are taking this lesson to heart, incorporating various ways of “doing” more and more across the curriculum. We invited schools to present some aspect of Jewish learning taking place on their campuses that is unusual and taps into a part of the Jewish library often overlooked in day school curricula. Several of these examples present projects that empower students to “do,” to express Judaism with their hands as well as their minds and hearts. All of them demonstrate creative new ways to study and engage with different facets of our Jewish heritage.



## TO LEARN TO TEACH

**BRIAN KING**

Director of Innovation,  
Milwaukee Jewish Day School

Milwaukee Jewish Day School is on a mission to bring as many authentic, student-owned learning experiences to our students as possible. The underlying idea is quite simple: authentic learning opportunities lead to much deeper student engagement; and deeper student engagement leads to better learning outcomes.

MJDS' fourth grade Jewish studies teacher takes this mission seriously. This year, she decided to throw out her traditional lessons on the High Holy Days and replace them with a more authentic experience. It all began with a simple question: how can we make the study of the High Holy Days really matter to a class of fourth graders who come from homes with diverse Jewish practices?

Her answer was bold. She reached out to the comparative religion professor at a nearby university and arranged for her fourth graders to teach a class to college students about the High Holy Days. Educational experiences don't get much more authentic than that.

The nature of this learning experience fundamentally changed the students' learning process. Because the final product was teaching a real class to real college students and not a test or project just for the teacher's eyes, they understood from the start that they had to produce quality work. And to produce quality work required collaboration with team members and the willingness to accept constructive feedback. Two groups even threw out their entire presentations and started over based on feedback from their classmates.

The groups—one each for Rosh HaShanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot and Simchat Torah—researched, compiled and synthesized information, organized presentations, and practiced—all the while working through technology challenges inherent in this type of project. Then they revised and revised again and again until, finally, presentation day finally arrived.

The students were nervous, but they were also excited and proud. They even dressed up. And they made their presentations to twenty-plus smiling college students with confidence and poise. Their work certainly wasn't perfect, but they will never forget the day a bunch of fourth graders taught college students about Judaism.





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## RABBI HOWARD FINKELSTEIN

Dean of Judaic Studies, Ottawa  
Jewish Community School

# MIKVAH: A J-STEM PROJECT

As schools are involved in the area of STEM, we at the Ottawa Jewish Community School are introducing J-STEM, involving the integration of Halakhah with science, technology, engineering and math through the construction of a model functional mikvah built to scale.

The building of a mikvah is a complex halakhic project as it involves not only the knowledge of the Jewish laws applicable to it, but also the implementation of key components involved in the study of STEM. From an engineering perspective, it has to be determined how the building and the water gathering system from both rainwater and city water should be constructed so as to ensure functionality. Students will study about water systems in general science, and work out how the cisterns gathering water shall be built in order to ensure that no leakage takes place.

Mathematics is used to determine the volume of the cisterns and the immersion pool as well as issues of water displacement. From a scientific basis, it will have to be determined how the water will be heated, and how the water will remain clean either through filtering and/or the use of chlorine. Another scientific challenge concerns the question of how the PH of the water will be tested.

Can the students create a technologically friendly way of ensuring that the process of filling the cisterns and immersion pool is functional and in accordance with Jewish law?

Most importantly, the students will study the halakhot of the mikvah and taharat hamishpachah (family purity) as they build this.

As this is an eighth grade project, students are assigned to teams and a project manager is selected.

The teams include the following committees: halakhic research, engineering, planning, aesthetics, material, technological. At the end of the project, students will create a video or slideshow depicting the mikvah.

In a community school setting, it is imperative that experiential Jewish education forms an important component of the students' Judaic instruction, and that clearly, there is integration between Judaic and secular studies. The building of a mikvah is such an example.

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## CATHERINE LASSER

Judaics Studies Teacher, Golda  
Och Academy, West Orange,  
New Jersey

# JEWISH MYSTICISM

In grades 10-12, our students can sign up for Jewish mysticism as one of the Judaic studies electives. Students choose from a number of options in Tanakh, rabbinics and Jewish humanities, and they are allowed to choose a concentration by taking five courses in one of these areas during this three-year period.

Designed as a text-based class, Jewish mysticism (which falls under the Jewish humanities concentration) encourages students to think outside the box and use free association and interpretation. It begins with some of the prophetic visions of the Tanakh and looks at Mishnah, Gemara, and Hekhalot literature as well as Sefer Yetsirah, Sefer Bahir, Lurianic mysticism, hasidic stories, and if time, the Tanya, for a historical view of Jewish mysticism. Students come to recognize that Jewish mysticism has been far more significant in Judaism than modern history has had us believe.

In addition to the texts, students learn some of the basic theoretical aspects of mysticism, such as levels of the soul, the worlds, gematria and the sefirot. To help students perform some of the practical aspects of mysticism, most Fridays we incorporate time for meditation in the Beit Knesset. Here, we try out various meditation techniques, using music (niggunim), text (Zohar) or guided imagery to draw on their imagination. Afterwards, we often take time for written reflections.

Specifically designed to meet during the second semester, the timing of the course allows students to develop an entire sefirot chart for the school, using mystical meanings that Jewish mysticism students put up each day (except weekends, which they fill in on Monday). Thus this class ensures that the entire school knows which day we are up to in the counting of the Omer. Since each sphere has a particular quality that is reflective of how God created the world, each pair of students takes a week to create images either using drawings or online images that reflect those qualities, such as chesed, strength, harmony, endurance, sovereignty and persistence. Our large chart in the hallway, created in conjunction with our art teacher Bethanie Watson, allows students to post their sphere for the day and explain their image choice to the class.

Our students truly look forward to this class. It is a rewarding way for us to enrich and enhance their critical thinking skills and deepen their ability to reflect and interpret different facets of Jewish mysticism.





## A NEW MODE OF LEARNING: SCRIBAL ARTS

### RABBI REUVEN MARGRETT

Director of Jewish  
Studies, Frankel  
Jewish Academy, West  
Bloomfield, Michigan

Being Jewish is a full-time, full-life experience. Jewish texts cover every aspect of life from birth, marriage and death to cooking, eating and even how to use the bathroom: Rabbi Akiva justified following Rabbi Yehoshua into the bathroom by saying, “It is Torah, and I need to learn” (Brachot 62a).

At school we focus on making texts accessible to students, and text study may, indeed, be necessary and essential in order to live a Jewish life. For some it is a gateway into their Jewish heritage. But I often wonder what other entrance points might engage and excite students into the rich tapestry of Jewish life.

For the past five years, I have taught a semester-long class called Scribal Arts that teaches the traditional way Jewish letters are written in sifrei Torah, tefillin, and mezuzot (called by the acronym Stam). We use the *kulmus* (quill), *klaf* (parchment), and *dyo* (ink) that sofrim (scribes) use. Students learn how to write the letters, while also studying the basic laws of Stam.

Once students gain rudimentary skills, we explore the deeper meaning behind the shape and form of the letters. Why is the bet, closed on three sides and open on one side, shaped the way it is? Why is there a hidden bet inside of the peh? In one class project, each student chooses their favorite letter, does research, and presents to the class their

findings. This semester, one student discussed how the letter kuf stands for kedushah (holiness), but kuf literally means “monkey.” She explained the letter teaches that holiness is not inherent in humans, but we have to live properly in order to become holy; if not, we are just monkeys. This was a valuable learning experience for the whole class.

Once students complete learning the scribal forms of the alephbet, we look at variations in the different scripts that sofrim use (Beit Yosef, Sephardi, Chabad) and compare the different sifrei Torah and megillot we have in our school, observing nuances and stylistic differences. For final projects, they make a Shiviti, a menorah formed out of the words of Psalm 67, and other creative scribal works of art.

For many students, this is a novel approach to Jewish learning. It is definitely all about the text, but from another angle—a refreshing way to engage in Jewish life. Some students carry on scribing into college and come back to show me their work. One student even opened up an online Etsy shop selling her own original scribal art.

Jewish life is so rich and diverse, and I wonder in what other ways we can open up this abundance to our students. Do students know how to make a Shabbat meal or make matzah? Do they know how to dance at a wedding or simchah? What other inroads to our vast and multifaceted traditions can we create for our students?



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RABBI SCOTT  
WESTLE

Rabbi-in-Residence, Abraham  
Joshua Heschel Day School,  
Northridge, California

## WHAT'S IN A NAMESAKE? PUTTING THE “HESCHEL” BACK IN HESCHEL DAY SCHOOL

In a recent article in the Los Angeles *Jewish Journal*, editor Rob Eshman remarked on the attitude of the Jewish establishment regarding Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's activism in the Civil Rights era. We take pride in Rabbi Heschel's stance, even as we find ourselves lethargic compared to his activity. Eshman continues that “we become self-satisfied, as if the miles Heschel walked with King count on our own Fitbits. They don't. In congratulating ourselves on our past, we neglect the work that must be done in the present.” When you work at a school with Rabbi Heschel's name attached to it, you simply cannot afford to let the life he lived and the Judaism he taught be mere lip service. Rather, it has to serve as a mission statement.

It is why one of the main goals of our school this year has been to put more Heschel in Heschel.

Rabbi Heschel has had a prominent space in our schoolwide educational plan this year. During our staff week in the fall, our entire faculty learned about Heschel's life and aspects of his personal philosophy. We learned about his stance on educators (“What we need more than anything else is not text-books but text-people”) and “radical amazement” (“What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder”). During a family shabbaton at a local Jewish summer camp in October, I taught parents the value of slowing down for a day and the power of enjoying others' presence, in conjunction with Heschel's ideas from his book *The Sabbath*.

As we built our communal “palace in time,” we came to understand with fuller hearts Heschel's concept that “the higher goal of spiritual living is not to amass a wealth of information, but to face sacred moments.” For many in our community, that weekend represented firsts: a first Shabbat, a first havdallah, a first time engaging in text study. There was no better context for why Shabbat matters than to teach in honor of the name, Heschel, that brought us all together.

Of course, as a school, the education of our students is the top priority. Teaching radical amazement to students is actually a lot simpler than teaching it to adults; simply look into their eyes as they experience the world. At Heschel, radical amazement happens daily. From our innovation lab and STEAM approach, from eighth grade interviews with Holocaust survivors, to a kindergarten hospitality tent where they welcome family and friends just like another famous Jewish Abraham, our students are challenged every day to connect their hearts and minds.

I have seen second graders draw pictures of Rabbi Heschel, fourth graders discuss his activism, and middle schoolers assess his Torah by way of philosophy, theology and his writings on the prophetic calling. If Heschel's thought thrived here, that would be a victory unto itself, but that is not our whole story. Our students, and larger community as well, are inspired to “pray with our legs” too. We teach Heschel's words at our communal events and especially when we engage in mitzvot and community service. The ethos of Heschel is alive and well as we get our own hands dirty in the hard work of shaping the world that ought to be, together.

It is a joy to teach in a school that has Heschel as a name. His life constantly inspires our community, and we in turn, keep his memory alive, through our learning, teaching and deeds. We are not merely satisfied with what Heschel did; we take it upon ourselves to talk his talk and walk his walk. It's a radically amazing way to educate the hearts and minds of our entire community.

# A JEWISH LITERACY PROGRAM

## SATISFYING OUR INVESTORS

If we were investors in a business venture, we would want to know exactly what service is being created, how it will be presented to the consumer, its effectiveness and, ultimately, what will result in consumer satisfaction. Ironically, when it comes to Jewish education, parents are willing to “invest” tens of thousands of dollars each year to educate their children so that they develop into young adults and literate Jews, but don’t ask the questions that investors are entitled to ask. They expect that their children will be Jewishly literate when they graduate from their Jewish school, but have little idea what the curriculum is, how it is taught by the teacher and whether the curriculum is effective in producing a Jewishly literate child. As investors, parents have the right to know the nature and the effectiveness of the product in which they are investing. Similarly, Jewish education funders have a right to know if their investment has been used well and has met their purposes.

STEVE  
BAILEY

Typically, schools publish a generic mission statement. But in most cases, these “mission statements” are broad, glib sound bites that describe vague goals that cannot be measured or assessed. The sad reality is that, in the end, parents and supporters rarely see evidence of the school fulfilling its expected goal of successfully imparting basic Jewish literacy to the majority of its students.

Aside from ambiguous outcome goals, a further obstacle to assuring a literate graduate is the common fact that different teachers have different ideas of what should be taught to their students. Some teachers stress proficiency in reading texts, while others stress ideas, not specific skills. Still others want their students to have “fun” in their classroom, regardless of what material is taught, while others believe that “Jewish identity” is more important than learning basic Jewish knowledge. In other words, while most curricula contain various educational approaches, what students learn is often dependent on the particular teacher. This results in a kind of “curriculum anarchy,” where students learn whatever their teacher thinks should be taught.

To make matters worse, teachers are expected to produce their own resources, materials, quizzes and tests. Not only is it unreasonable to expect all teachers to research and produce their own materials, but even if they did, the material chosen and taught would differ in content and quality from teacher to teacher. The inevitable outcome is disordered and imbalanced Jewish education for most students, and, consequently, students lack broad literacy and leave with a negative association with Jewish learning upon graduation.

Having researched this issue and implemented a successful Jewish literacy program, I offer the

following fundamental guidelines for schools that wish to produce Jewishly literate graduates in a way that fulfills their “investors” expectations.

First, we have to acknowledge that every school has its own definition of basic Jewish literacy. While some schools emphasize talmudic study and facility in reading text in the original as literacy, others stress the essential themes and values of Tanakh, with less concern for proficiency in Hebrew texts or commentaries. Still other schools may focus on Jewish history and Israel studies as basic, while some focus on Jewish law and custom, holiday rituals and prayer as primary objectives. So the first step in developing an effective literacy curriculum is defining what *your particular school* considers a “literate” graduate. To be sure, any Jewish day school curriculum will likely include all the above areas, but every school has its own explicit hierarchy of importance as expressed through quantity of material taught and time allotted to various subjects.

The next step is taking these literacy goals and *customizing* a curriculum, in observable and measurable terms, which reflects achievement of these objectives. For example, instead of this vague statement: “Students will know key figures in the Book of Bereshit,” an objective would state: “Students will be able to name Noah and his three children, as well as the three sets of Patriarchs and Matriarchs and their respective children.” Only the latter statement is considered a measurable criterion for basic Jewish literacy.

Moreover, the curriculum needs to be “spiral” in nature so that teachers at each grade level have specific objectives that prepare the student for the next grade. This avoids needless repetition of material in the higher grade—something that students consider boring and useless. How many

time have we heard students complain, “Oh, no! We already learned all this about Pesach two years ago!” To quell this inevitable student revolt, each subsequent grade needs to briefly review past knowledge and then spend most of the class time enriching, elaborating and presenting new, more sophisticated ideas appropriate for the current grade level. Each year *builds* on the past years.

At this point I need to present an idea that is unpopular with administrators and teachers. The only way to insure that teachers will teach the material that the school has defined as basic Jewish literacy for its students in a structured fashion, is to produce actual student booklets for each grade, containing questions, quizzes and activities on the literacy material—along with teacher’s guides—all of which reflect the curriculum content for that grade. That way, all teachers have to teach the same *standardized*, basic knowledge and skills at each grade. Moreover, quizzes and tests are standardized by the school to assure that these goals have been achieved, grade-by-grade.

Typically, this idea produces two protests. Administrators will argue that it is costly to actually produce student workbooks each year, as well as teacher’s guides. While this is true, it is a one-time expense for the initial curriculum materials that can be reprinted for many years to come. Furthermore, the word-processed materials can be easily modified and adjusted each year based on teacher feedback, when new booklets are printed. Your customized workbooks, which assure your school’s basic literacy goals, are an investment worth making.

In terms of faculty concern, teachers will protest that they are being asked to “teach to the test” and are not free to “do their own thing” in their own classroom. My answer is: “Yes, you are being asked to ‘teach to the test’ because this will assure that all students will achieve basic literacy (we call that “mastery learning”), but you also are free to enrich and enhance the material once it has been covered and to use your own dynamic and creative, personal style in transmitting the material.” Most teachers are pleased to use standardized curriculum and tests and be unburdened from producing their own materials, so long as they are free to use their own teaching style.

A third critical element to this model may also produce initial protest from teachers. In order to assure that basic literacy goals are met for each grade, teachers will be held responsible for their students achieving a minimal mastery level of material—for example, a criterion of 70% of students scoring 70% or higher on standard quizzes and tests. Monitoring teachers’ effective transmission of the school’s basic Jewish literacy standardized curriculum is critical to assure genuine achievement and preparation of students for the next grade. Teachers’ initial fears of assuming responsibility for their pupils’ learning are often quelled by the fact that a combination of student workbooks, teacher’s guides, standardized quizzes and

effective teaching methodology easily produces the expected criterion.

One last critical step is necessary to insure the school’s parental “investors” that they have gotten their money’s worth. The school must assess the graduating student’s Jewish literacy through a final assessment of material learned in the school’s Jewish education program. This may be accomplished best through a comprehensive, computerized, individual examination of each graduating student’s mastery of the school’s basic Jewish studies curriculum. Existing educational software will allow schools to set up areas of questions (using multiple-choice, fill-in, short answer, matching, etc.) on a computer-based, self-scoring assessment module that has a number of separate areas (Tanakh, history, laws and customs, holiday cycle, Israel, etc.), each of which has to be passed satisfactorily. Those who pass all areas the first time receive a certificate, with honors. If students do not pass a subject area at first, they simply retake the exam for that subject until they master the material and receive a certificate,

thus assuring eventual literacy success before graduation.

The outcome of this model is that *graduating students* experience a concrete sense of educational accomplishment—achievement of basic Jewish literacy—as attested to by passing a final examination. *Teachers* experience a sense of success at producing Jewishly literate graduates; *administrators* experience great satisfaction at fulfilling their stated goals of educating their students; *parents* are pleased to see explicit, empirical evidence that their huge financial investment in their child’s Jewish education has paid off and *funders* are satisfied that their allotment of funds has been used responsibly. Truly, a rare five-way “win-win” model of Jewish Literacy.

*Educators and stakeholders can review the details of successful implementation of this model in my chapter, “Jewish Literacy by Design: A Case Study of Developing and Implementing a Jewish Literacy Curriculum,” in eds. Rich, Y., et. al., Jewish Literacy and Education.*



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 SIVAN  
ZAKAI

# FROM MULTIPLE CHOICE TO MULTIPLE CHOICES

## RETHINKING ISRAEL LITERACY IN OUR SCHOOLS

Can the students in your school name Israel's capital? Its most populous city? A way it has brought technological advancement to the world? The religions that view Jerusalem as holy? When students can correctly answer these factual questions, it is often assumed that they have achieved Israel literacy. But there's a big difference between knowing facts about Israel and knowing how to participate in its present and future.

The most important questions for students to consider as a part of Israel education are not factual questions, but contested, debatable, and open-ended ones: What is Zionism? How can Judaism be enacted in the realpolitik, and how (if at all) should Judaism influence political and military decision making? Why is there a conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, and what might it take to make steps towards a peaceful resolution? What responsibilities does the Jewish State have for Jews outside its borders and non-Jews under its rule? What responsibilities do Jews outside of Israel have to Israel and its citizens? These are not questions that can be answered in an Israel quiz bowl or on a multiple choice Israel literacy test. They have been answered differently in different times and places, and by those with different political and religious beliefs today. It is the very multiplicity of answers that make up the rich tapestry of true Israel literacy.

Helping students understand and engage with these big questions requires shifting from a "multiple choice" approach to Israel literacy to a "multiple choices" engagement with challenging, debatable questions. In a "multiple choice" approach, Israel education is focused on teaching students the right answers to factual questions about Israel's geography, population, government, history and culture. Teachers ask questions that have clear answers. Student success is measured by how much they know. Teachers have done their job well when all students have the same answers.

In a "multiple choices" approach, facts about Israeli history, society and culture are not an end but rather a means to understanding that Israelis and Jews have made critical decisions, affecting their self-understanding and ways of life, in response to the ongoing questions of Zionism and Judaism. In this approach to Israel education,



teachers ask questions that have no clear answers and present challenges that have no simple solutions. Student success is measured by the extent to which they can develop articulate, passionate, well-reasoned and empirically substantiated ideas. Teachers have done their job well when their students give voice to a multiplicity of thoughtful answers.

A “multiple choices” approach to Israel literacy stands upon three interrelated, underlying principles: the notion that Israel has been shaped by multiple voices, multiple visions, and multiple values.

## MULTIPLE VOICES

If students are to truly understand the big questions of contemporary Israeli and Jewish life, and begin to form their own opinions and approaches to them, they must be able to hear and learn from voices from different segments of Israeli society. Many schools inadvertently privilege Ashkenazi Jewish experiences by framing Israeli and Zionist histories as a response to European anti-Semitism. Day school students should certainly be familiar with this narrative, but they must also know the stories of Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews that call Israel home, and also those of Druze, Bedouin and Palestinian communities in Israel. Students should hear the multitude of voices that constitute the spectrum of Israeli society: those who affiliate with chareidi, national-religious, secular and religiously progressive Jewish communities in Israel, as well as those from Muslim and Christian communities. Students must know that Israel's story is a tale of sabras, but also one of immigrants and migrant workers and tourists and those with permanent residency.

A well-constructed curriculum will teach, over time, two overarching lessons about the multiple voices of Israeli society. First, each of these segments of the Israeli population has had a different role in shaping the communities and institutions of Israel. Second, no subset of the Israeli population is monolithic: chareidi Jews disagree amongst themselves, as do Russian immigrants and Palestinians with Israeli citizenship. Therefore, the multiple voices of Israel graft onto—but not always along clean lines—multiple visions for Israel.

## MULTIPLE VISIONS

Both Israelis and Jews around the world have differing visions of what Israel is—and what it should be. Israel, in this approach to literacy, can be framed as a place for the ingathering of Jewish exiles from around the world and/or one of multiple hubs of contemporary Jewish life. It can be the solution to global anti-Semitism and/or a magnet for global anti-Semitism. It can be a liberal democracy and/or a Jewish nation-state. It can be *Yerushalayim shel ma'alah*, a source of spirituality, and/or *Yerushalayim shel matah*, a place of gritty reality. Its importance can be found in its rich history and/or in its role as a high-tech startup nation. Its significance can be located in its standing as the only Jewish State in the world and/or in the fact that it has captured the hearts and prayers of so many religions and peoples. It can be a place that offers safe haven to Jews and/or a place fraught with violence and danger for both Israelis and Palestinians.

In some moments and for some people, these different visions for Israel are compatible with one another; at other moments, or for other people, these visions may come into conflict. Any curriculum based on a “multiple choices” approach to literacy must teach students to understand that there are—and have been since the inception of modern Zionism—multiple visions for what Israel should be. And these differing visions for Israel are driven by different ways that people prioritize among the multiple values they hold dear.

## MULTIPLE VALUES

As Israelis and Jews make choices about the lives they lead, the communities they construct, and the causes they support, they are driven by the many values they wish to uphold. These may include democracy and self-determination, pluralism and diversity, safety and security, Judaism and Halakhah, justice and fairness, economic prosperity, environmental protection, transnational cooperation, and more. Political hawks and doves disagree about who they believe should best lead Israel's government precisely because they place different weight on these values that always compete for prominence in the *realpolitik*. Similarly, secular and religious Jews may differently prioritize among the principles that guide their decision making.

Focusing on multiple values is essential for helping students make sense of the multiple voices and multiple visions they should encounter when they study Israel. And, when taken as a triumvirate, a multiple voices/multiple visions/multiple values approach provides a meaningful thread that can be woven throughout the day school curriculum, for much of history, classical Jewish texts, literature and art can also be viewed through these lenses.

For many schools, the goal of Israel education is twofold: to help students better understand Israel and to cultivate in students a connection to Israel. A “multiple choice” approach to Israel literacy ultimately does neither. It is certainly easier—less time-consuming, less complicated, and less politically fraught—to situate the teaching of Israel in key facts about its geography, history or political structure. But such information is insufficient to help students understand the rich tapestry of people, communities, ideas, and institutions that constitute Israel. And, perhaps more damning, any feelings of connection this learning may generate are ultimately surface-level, easily uprooted in the face of difficult questions about Israel's treatment of Palestinians, the standing of non-Orthodox Judaism in the state, or the environmental impact of its policies.

For students to have roots firmly planted in the soil of *eretz Yisrael*, they must be equipped to understand and participate in discussions about the big, unsettled questions in contemporary Israeli and Jewish discourse: What does it mean to be a Zionist in the 21st century? What can be done about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and what principles must be protected in an attempt to move forward? What rights and responsibilities do Israeli and American Jewish communities have for one another?

These are questions that adults have not yet settled, but that doesn't make them inappropriate for children to consider. My research on how American Jewish children understand Israel has shown that even kindergarteners are fully capable of understanding some of the fundamental tensions embodied by the State of Israel. As early as age 5, children understand that Israel is a Jewish state and a state for its citizens, a safe haven for Jews and a dangerous place, a place at once incredibly special and profoundly ordinary. Therefore, a multiple voices/multiple visions/multiple values approach to Israel can begin even in kindergarten, establishing at the beginning of a child's education the basic principle that Israelis and Jews have multiple communities, multiple beliefs, and multiple yearnings about what Israel can and should be.

As with all good curricula, both the ideas and the examples of how they manifest can become increasingly complex over time. But all young learners are capable of—and deserve—a curriculum that focuses on the multiple choices that Israelis and Jews have made about how they live. For only by learning about the diversity of voices, visions and values in Israel can students come to truly understand and care about what happens there.







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JOSH  
LAMBERT

# JEWISH LITERATURE AND LITERACY

Scholars of English literacy tell us that it's a difficult subject to pin down: does it refer to the ability to read a Stop sign, an income tax form, or a sonnet? Jewish literacy is even more multiform and elusive. So what does it mean to be literate in "Jewish"?

One answer can be found in Rabbi Joseph Telushkin's *Jewish Literacy*, the book, published in 1991 and then revised in 2008, that can be credited with popularizing the term. It's a wonderful, capacious, and useful resource, modeled on E. D. Hirsch Jr.'s *Cultural Literacy*. But as much as it can teach a reader about the history and beliefs of Jews, it also speaks volumes in what it excludes.

Look up the name "Roth" in Telushkin's index, and you'll find Cecil, the historian, but not the writers Joseph, Henry or Philip. There's no mention of Kafka or Babel or Ozick. Henrietta Szold is in there, but not her contemporary Emma Lazarus.





This isn't because Telushkin is ignorant of belles lettres. On the contrary, he devotes a chapter to Sholem Aleichem, and mentions the great Yiddish and Hebrew writers I. L. Peretz, C. N. Bialik, S. Y. Agnon and I. B. Singer at least in passing. But *Jewish Literacy's* lack of attention to Jewish authors who wrote in English, German, Russian and other languages reflects the degree to which modern Jewish literature—especially that written in non-Jewish languages, but also in modern Hebrew and Yiddish—has often *not* seemed to be necessary for Jewish literacy.

I observed this firsthand: I attended Jewish day schools in Toronto in the 1980s and 1990s, from kindergarten until the end of high school, but it was only when I enrolled at a university founded by Protestants that I first heard the names Sholem Aleichem and I. L. Peretz. In my high school English classes, we read Canadian writers Farley Mowat and Margaret Laurence, but never Canadian Jewish writers like Mordecai Richler or Adele Wiseman. We did not, in other words, read literature written about Jews like us.

There was a reason for this, I came to understand later. The literary scholar Julian Levinson has noted that, from its beginnings, the premises and goals of modern Jewish literature have struck many as being at odds with the goals of Jewish education. Though he himself directed a Jewish school in Odessa, the pioneer of modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature, S. Y. Abramovitsh, who published under the name of Mendeleyev the Book Peddler, wrote vicious, hilarious satires of the Jewish communal authorities of his time. Almost a century later, Philip Roth's early stories were denounced in print and from the pulpit by the some of the most prominent rabbis of his day. For the most part, modern literature has been regarded by Jewish authorities as a waste of time at best, and a threat at worst.

That's a shame, because in modern Jewish literature we have what Ruth Wisse called "the repository of modern Jewish experience," a treasure house for the kind of Jewish literacy that is most relevant to us today. That is, modern literature has preserved the everyday behaviors, speech, and conflicts of modern Jews, in a way that nothing else in the curriculum of Jewish studies captures with as much detail or drama.

Take, for one small example, one of my favorite stories to teach in the Great Jewish Books Summer Program at the Yiddish Book Center, Philip Roth's "Defender of the Faith." Published in the *New Yorker* in 1959, this was the first short story that brought Roth, then twenty-six years old, to national attention (and, yes, it's one of the ones attacked by prominent rabbis). There's a moment at the beginning of the story in which some American Jewish soldiers, on a base in Missouri near the end of World War II, are trying to figure out whether their sergeant, Marx, is Jewish too.

This, in and of itself, is an experience with which most of our students will identify. Part of being a Jew in twenty-first-century America is, on occasion, being unsure whether or not someone you meet is Jewish. And how, exactly, do you find out?

In the story, the decisive moment arrives when Marx, exasperated, snaps at one of the soldiers and says that if he wants to, yes, he can skip out on his Friday night duties and "go to shul." Up to this point in the story, Marx and the others have used the term "services" to describe prayers, but when Marx drops the Yiddish term for a synagogue, his identity becomes crystal clear.

When I teach this moment, I ask students to list all the names they use, or have heard people use, to describe the place where Jewish religious services are held. They always tell me, in addition to "services" and "shul," words like "temple," "synagogue," and "Beit Knesset." I ask them why it is that we have so many words for the same thing, and what each word connotes. Many students know the answers, but many have never thought about it before, and most have not considered the relationships the denominations have to Yiddish, English, Hebrew and Greek.

Ultimately, Roth's story explores a much bigger question: whether and when it is ethical for American Jews to show preferential treatment to other Jews over their fellow, non-Jewish Americans. This is a real-life question that students will encounter, in various forms, both when they get to college and in the working world. It is one of the issues in which a Jew has to be fluent, so to speak, in our time. Roth's story gives the question flesh, as well as life-or-death stakes.

Indeed, part of the reason Roth's story works so well in the classroom is that its stakes are so high. That's why dozens of readers wrote to him after it was published, some praising him for writing a truly honest story, others accusing him of self-hatred. This is a key aspect of modern Jewish literature that makes it educationally powerful: like all modern and contemporary literature, it emphasizes *conflict*.

Let me give another example. In 1945, the Yiddish poet Kadya Molodowsky wrote a poem called "*El Chanun*," which has been translated as "God of Mercy." In it, the poetic speaker entreats God to "choose another people": "We are tired of death and dying, / We have no more prayers ... We have no more blood / To be a sacrifice."

It's a grim, angry poem that argues with God, at a moment of the most intense collective suffering and despair. Of course, such feelings are common enough among modern Jews contemplating tragedies like the Holocaust. The fascinating thing about Molodowsky's poem is that it employs the language of prayer to sharpen its critique, drawing many terms from liturgical language. So, when I teach the poem, students enter into a conversation about the phrase *El chanun* and where it appears in Tanakh and liturgy, and how the students, individually, communicate with God. It's a short poem that students can read in five minutes, but that leads to hours of productive, challenging discussion about chosenness, gender and prayer. I have taught it to students who identify as ultra-Orthodox, secular humanist, and everything in between, and I have never encountered one not moved by it.

Those are just a couple of examples of texts that confront the most challenging questions students will have about Jewishness. What these texts can do is to increase the fluency of students in discussing

the major Jewish questions of our times—and this, I submit, is a kind of Jewish literacy that matters very much.

Literary texts treat every issue or concern a Jewish student might have, reflecting all the major historical and theological Jewish movements of modern times, from the Haskalah to the latest debate in the Knesset. And it's one thing to tell students that Orthodox Jews and Reform Jews, or religious and secular Jews, or Israeli and American Jews have disagreed about this or that. It's another to give them the stories or poems in which such conflicts are *felt*, so that they can feel them, too.

Such literature has a key role to play in English and language-arts courses at Jewish day schools, and in Jewish history and Judaic studies classes, too. Notwithstanding the recent, controversial banning of a novel by the Israeli Ministry of Education, the time should be long past when an author who has dramatized intermarriage, or religious doubt, or political controversy could be seriously seen as a threat to a teenager's Jewish education. Most of the teachers I have talked to in recent years agree that teaching modern Jewish literature is a natural way to introduce the most important issues in contemporary Jewish life. But many teachers still have not had the opportunity to study this material in depth, and aren't sure where to start.

That excites me, as a literary scholar, because I know how much extraordinary work is being done by my academic colleagues to make the rich, multilingual library of modern Jewish literature newly accessible to students, teachers, and the Jewish community as a whole. The opportunity, right now, is to find the right ways to get this rich material into the hands of teachers who will know exactly how to use it.

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 ELIE  
KAUNFER

# HEBREW LITERACY

## PASSPORT AND LYNCHPIN

It is heartening to see glimmerings of a shift in the debate about the importance of Jewish day school, moving away from “Jewish identity and values” and toward Jewish literacy. For me, the shape-shifting nature of Jewish values crystalized after I read a speech that former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg gave when accepting the Genesis award in 2014. As quoted by the *New York Times*,

Mr. Bloomberg said his religiously observant parents had inculcated Jewish values around the dinner table, and he identified those qualities Thursday night as “freedom, justice, service, ambition, innovation ...The values I learned from my parents are probably the same values that, I hope, Christians and Muslims and Hindus and Buddhists learned from their parents.”

Clearly Jewish values are extremely broad and, by definition here, something shared by other faiths. Deep Jewish literacy, on the other hand, cannot be confused with the activities of other religions or peoples.

The advantage of a debate centered around Jewish values, however, is that all Jews feel that they are living them out (or trying to). No one is opposed to “Jewish values” on a philosophical basis. However, Jewish literacy has less of a broad appeal. Somewhere along the line, the “people of the Book” adopted the position that Jewish literacy is for the elite. Those opposed to articulating the importance of Jewish day school in terms of literacy might say, Why struggle to achieve something unachievable for all but the very motivated and few in number?

I believe, however, that deep Jewish literacy is achievable, and to give up hope of a broad appeal means letting go of one of Judaism’s fundamental claims: that the Torah is “not in heaven” but attainable by all.

How might we increase literacy for a broad number of Jews? The key, in my opinion, is the Hebrew language. At its core, literacy is language, and knowledge of Hebrew unlocks so many doors to Jewish understanding. Learning a language may seem like a high bar, but I believe it is well positioned to be the rallying point in a renewed cry for broad literacy.

There are a number of reasons for this:

- Thanks to the rise of the modern state of Israel, one need not have any particular religious outlook to understand the value of the Hebrew language as a communication tool across Jewish populations. Jews may disagree about whether we are an ethnicity or a religion, but when it

comes to talking to the Jews of the land of Israel—and indeed many Jews around the world—no one can deny the value of Hebrew language.

- Unlike the transmission of Jewish values, attaining Hebrew literacy is something that can easily be tracked and assessed, allowing us to measure collective progress. For instance, you can clearly chart how many people have achieved x level of literacy by y deadline. You could divide this by age (eg, 50% of pre-5 year olds should be in Hebrew educational environments by 2020); by local community (20% of people in x community will move up a level of Hebrew comprehension by 2020); by educational environment (30% of Jews on campus will complete one year of college-level Hebrew by 2020, or 40% of Jewish camps serving ages 8-16 will contain a Hebrew immersion track by 2020).
- The Jewish community may never agree on the specific emphases of Jewish practice, but Hebrew transcends the narrowness of Jewish division. Hebrew is critical for the vibrant transmission and understanding of our textual tradition; it is a crucial ingredient in spiritual worship; it can serve as a point of commonality in cross-community encounters.

There are many venues where people can work to attain Hebrew literacy, and indeed no one outlet will suffice. Hebrew can be taught in colleges, summer programs, religious training institutions (text-focused), ulpanim (modern-focused), preschools, and private tutoring. Day schools (and, of course, Hebrew charter schools) are best poised to be the most effective delivery system of Hebrew literacy.

In considering Hebrew literacy as a rallying point for Jewish literacy generally (and in day schools specifically), I want to offer two further thoughts, both of which stem from my experience as a parent. The first is that Hebrew language—like any language—is best and perhaps only really acquired through immersion. No news here, but a little immersion as a jump start can go a very long way. I learned this firsthand when my oldest daughter was in pre-K in Israel a few years



ago. She came from a strong Jewish home with two Jewish educator parents, but she knew next to no Hebrew. We didn't look hard for a school, we just wanted any school in which they would speak Hebrew all day. People told us that by Hannukah she would be fluent. I remember not believing them; how could that be possible? The first word our daughter learned was "ככה," which she insisted meant pretty much anything. A week later in the shower, she was repeating very forcefully: "מה שלומך!" Then she turned to me and said, "What does שלומך mean?" Acquiring the language was not easy: she spend much of those days not sure what was going on in school.

But by Hannukah, she was indeed fluent (and liked going to school). She could understand and speak Hebrew. It took, as the experts claim, a little over 400 hours. We left Israel in February of that year, and she has not experienced a Hebrew immersive environment in the same way. But through a combination of Hebrew-speaking camp and her day school with a native Israeli track, she has kept up her Hebrew. The point is that with a relatively small investment of true immersion, at the right age, significant progress can be made. This does not come easily, but can be done, with long-lasting impact.

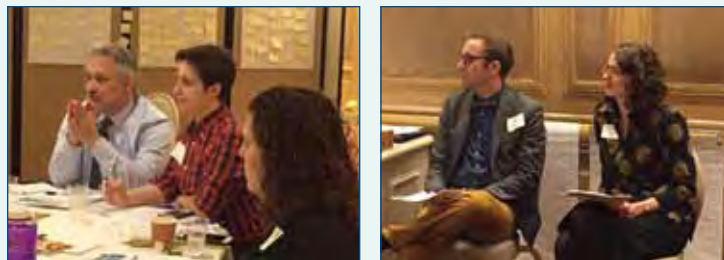
The second thought is related to the relative importance of understanding vs. familiarity, specifically as it relates to prayer in Hebrew. The current trend seems to be that children should never be made to pray words that they cannot translate. This seems a reaction to the old style of Hebrew school (and some day school) teaching of having children memorize the prayers without ever investigating the content, all in service of performing at the bar/bat mitzvah. However, swinging the pendulum too far in the other direction can also be a mistake.

There is a tendency to assume that children will only derive meaning in prayer by saying words they understand. This is not always the case; children are extremely adept at reciting words they don't understand—and enjoying it. I saw this when my daughters, ages 4 and 6 at the time, memorized every single word to the songs of *Frozen*, the Disney movie. They had no idea what "frozen fractals" were, but that didn't stop them from belting out the lyrics. In addition, part of the joy of learning a language—and studying that language deeply—comes from a recognition, years later, about "what we were saying all along." There is no shame in that, and in some ways, the process is sweeter; texts and words that are so familiar later become understood on a whole new level. Finally, the fallacy that children (or adults!) can understand all the meanings and connotations of our prayers, Psalms, or sacred literature presumes a linear engagement with language that is simply not possible. If we only learned what we could understand, we would learn very little, very slowly.

My hope is that the engaged Jewish world is starting to understand more clearly the value of Jewish literacy (over Jewish values and identity). Hebrew literacy is a lynchpin in this reframing. This shift is not only possible but has already occurred in our age in many Diaspora communities outside the US. With the right framing, funding, and, most importantly, will, we can raise the level of Hebrew literacy in America as well, driving a broader march toward Jewish literacy.

*This article was adapted from a paper written for the Jewish Federations of North America Global Planning Table.*

## Keshet Trains Metro New York City Jewish Day School Leaders in LGBT Inclusion



Leaders of 15 Jewish day schools from the New York City metro area have begun a yearlong process of making their institutions more welcoming and inclusive of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students and their families.

Approximately 40 teachers, deans, heads of school and other administrative officials gathered December 14 at Park Avenue Synagogue in New York City for the Keshet-RAVSAK Leadership Project kickoff summit, where they underwent a day of intensive training and created individualized LGBT-inclusion action plans for the coming year.

Participants were introduced to core concepts of sex, gender and sexual orientation; explored the relevance of LGBTQ inclusion to Jewish institutions and community life; and learned how to evaluate their current programs, policies and culture, and recognize opportunities for change.

Over the next 12 months, they will receive ongoing coaching, training and support from Keshet leaders as they work to put their plans into action.

Catherine Bell, Keshet's national program director, said she is gratified to have partnered with RAVSAK to bring together such a diverse group of Jewish educational institutions in the New York City area.

"When schools step up to the challenge of becoming truly inclusive of students and faculty of all sexual orientations and gender identities," Bell said, "it not only makes the school a healthy environment for LGBT students, but makes the entire school community stronger as well."

Keshet, the leading national organization working for the full inclusion of LGBT Jews in Jewish life, has conducted more than eight successful leadership summits throughout the United States since 2014. There are now more than 100 organizations that have been engaged in the program, making strides toward sustainable and concrete change for a more LGBT-inclusive environment.

Participating schools at the December 14 Keshet-RAVSAK Leadership Project kickoff summit were:

- Beit Rabban Day School, New York City
- Bi-Cultural Day School, Stamford, Connecticut
- Carmel Academy, Greenwich, Connecticut
- Abraham Joshua Heschel, Lower, Middle and High School, New York City
- Luria Academy of Brooklyn, Brooklyn, NY
- Golda Och Academy, Lower and Upper School, West Orange, NJ
- Rodeph Sholom School, New York City
- SAR Academy and High School, Riverdale, NY
- Hannah Senesh Community Day School, Brooklyn, NY
- Schechter School of Long Island, Jericho, NY
- Solomon Schechter School of Manhattan, New York City
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BARBARA  
ELLISON ROSENBLIT

# STAYING ALIVE

## EMBRACING CURRICULAR CHANGE AND COLLABORATION

The entire first floor of The Weber School is a Women's Gallery, displaying the lives of close to a hundred women along its art-lit hallways and alcoves. These are not the photographs of donors or past presidents. Rather, the lives we celebrate along this floor are ordinary Jewish women who have led often unheralded lives, each interviewed by individual students who then translated their lives into the vocabulary of conceptual art—using metaphor and juxtaposition, texture, color, and symbolic object, using the mixed media tools of the conceptual artist. The teen concept-artists animated sepia-tinted lives of 80 or 90 or 100 years into color, teasing out their textures, exploring them with whimsy or poignancy, always looking toward meaning. From the minute you enter our building and make your way down our hallways, you know you are in a different kind of school: a place where curricular innovation is prized, shared and given a prominent place, a school where ordinary life and narrative can inspire art, an environment where curricular iconoclasm is the language of discourse.



Curricular ideas are not hard to dream up. Implementing them with insistence on maintaining their integrity, both initially and over time, takes fierce determination. Convincing colleagues, who may bristle at, or be afraid of, change is the biggest hurdle to substantive new initiatives. What if an idea is so big that it promises to—threatens to—upset “school as we know it”? What if the risks are real and the rewards uncertain? What if it bombs?

I will share two of the many initiatives that have propelled us this year. Each is big, each game-changing for our school; each is at a critical stage of its development—one in the early stages of design and implementation, the other at a key moment for honest review and revision.

### IDEA 1

The first initiative is Haskalah Term. Here's the premise: take a month off midyear, put a cold stop to whatever you've been doing, fire it up with wild, team-taught, interdisciplinary never-before-offered courses, reconstruct time to fit the course, not the other way around—blast off the doors of the school to include the entire city, bring in “adjuncts” to teach hot-button courses we aren't trained for—and from the get-go, insist on seamless integration of general and Jewish studies that we all acknowledge is the missing connective tissue of day school education.

### The Hurdles

There are huge hurdles to clear. This idea challenges many sacred notions of day schools, presents teachers with the challenge of creating additional curricula beyond what they teach the other eight months of the year, and asks that they team up across disciplines to push past their comfort zones for a full month's unvetted experiment. They will be losing a month's instructional time in “regular” classes, stopping AP courses cold for a month, and substituting substantive broad learning instead. Will teachers feel competent to face down long-held assumptions and overcome resistance to challenging the status quo?

## Clearing Hurdles: Energized Pole-Vaulting or Measured Bridge-Building?

Pole-vaulting is a solo endeavor, stunningly glorious when successful. Bridge-building is slower, requiring a plan and group of skilled builders working in concert, but the result is a permanent entryway to somewhere new. For Idea 1, we opted for bridge-building.

The first pylon we set down acknowledged the difficulty of what we are asking of our entire faculty. Then we faced down its inherent cons: four weeks less for the semester courses, but in its place new month-long and decidedly interdisciplinary courses. The pros? An ambitious opportunity that supports and furthers our mission, that reinspires faculty and students, that provides a vehicle for defining ourselves—as innovators, as interdisciplinary big thinkers that have the power to break down curricular silos—and a real invitation for intense schoolwide interdisciplinary commitment to JS/GS integration.

Our inspired head of school, who loves to fan the flames of innovation, and does it with vigor and intention, gave us the go-ahead for January 2017.

And go we did. First we targeted the early adapters, those teachers undaunted and exhilarated by initial out-of-the-box conversations, to form The Design Team. We designed early iterations of a calendar and schedule and talked through problems of credit and sports participation and grades and GPAs. Our next step will be in early spring when we will roll it out to the faculty and take time to unpack and digest and consider the issues that will emerge. By April we will call for first drafts of proposed courses for Haskalah Term's debut.

### Off-roading

This “month off” will be a “month on,” on long curricular expeditions into uncharted territory—part project-based learning, part true interdisciplinary collaboration and cohesion, part pure nervous experiment—but all reminding us that we, who spend our lives in the classroom, crave curricular complexity and collegiality to keep us alive. The support structure of the bridge is up; now we're designing the cars.

Due diligence matters when institutional change is at stake. We looked at models of other schools that have taken some version of this road. Two are here in Atlanta and we've had repeated conversations and visits with both. The first, founded in the 1970s, incorporated two months of curricular exploration as part of their founding vision. The second, founded in 1878, with the largest endowment of any non-boarding school in the United States, took several focused years and six out-of-state visits to progressive independent schools to study the idea, plus two years of stakeholder focus groups to test the water. This January, they moved forward with a 3-week experiment. Both schools shared with us cautions and encouragement. And both helped us understand that our template must be designed to reflect who and what we are.

There are budgetary issues. We envision classes after lunch to be “expeditionary.” Imagine, for instance, a class called Atlanta: Past, Present and Future: Civil War excursions, the sites of early Jewish settlement and 19th C. Reform and Orthodox synagogues, the living history of Leo Frank, the chiseled gravestones at historic Oakland Cemetery documenting early Jewish Atlanta settlement, trips to the Capitol Building and conversations with current legislators and policy makers, city planners and transportation moguls looking to our future. *That* would be a month of learning and traveling that leaves students with whole cloth learning, not scraps pinned together. And this was just one of thirty interwoven big course ideas that emerged from our very first Design Team meeting. Once the curricular straitjacket is off, teachers can levitate.

The Design Team is alight with nervous energy at the size of the initiative but also the potential we feel at what might be unleashed. Stay tuned.

## IDEA 2

The second idea is long discussed in new day school thinking: to offer Jewish studies course credit in general studies electives by re-configuring the general syllabus to inject Jewish studies texts and connectors at key moments. While this may seem less radical than beginning with a blank slate for integrating courses, it is also more cumbersome. Meaningful, seamless connections are hard to anticipate and choreograph so that students have seen one performance when the curtain goes down on the class, not two disconnected acts that leave you puzzled about what you just saw.

Here we chose to pole-vault instead of bridge build. The run-up to the high bar can, potentially at least, propel you skyward. So, several courses ripe for the challenge were targeted, each taught by teachers willing to give it a try. Six popular electives were selected, ranging across three departments: English, history and science. Teachers agreed to rework their curricula and create Jewish Studies connections using texts, materials and knowledgeable colleagues outside their department. The electives selected were six popular and successful ones: Astronomy (Science), Dante (Humanities), Rebels, Freaks, and Fools in Literature and Film (English), The Salt Life: A Voyage in Nautical Literature (English), Down the Rabbit Hole (a core philosophy course), and American Humanities, a cross-disciplinary course looking at America 1654-1950. We are nearing the end of its first semester of implementation and now ready for the critical next step: evaluation and revision.

### Clearing the Hurdles

One hurdle was that of the 5 teachers teaching those 6 courses, 4 were not Jewish (3 Christians and one Hindu). They all shared an investment in the value of Jewish/general studies interdisciplinary connections and were particularly excited about their own learning as the term unfolded. To assure intellectual integrity, deeply important to all the participants, the initial proposal guaranteed a safety net of resources and Jewish studies colleagues' help finding fertile moments of connection and serving as guest teachers.

Teachers agreed to look at existing syllabi and locate cohesion points at those organically ripe moments. That works best if a Jewish studies colleague sits with you as the course is developing and is also willing to be the expert in the room at predetermined times during the course. Logistical arrangements can be the sticking point, and in interdisciplinary curricula, timing matters.

Initially there was plenty of nervousness and understandable reluctance but also a healthy, “if not now, when” willingness to trailblaze. Now at midpoint in the year, we take a healthy pause to look back, evaluate, tinker and tune and rethink and revise based on what we learned.

The outcome of the individual evaluation conversations had common threads. They all agreed that the authenticity of all interdisciplinary learning rests on the seamlessness of the connections you are creating, because in that seamless weaving lies the elegance of deep learning. In mid-year evaluation discussions, participants propose the elegant, foolproof and expensive model of two teachers in the room together. It is no coincidence that is the model for next year's Haskalah Term. We'll be able to see if that model is the ideal we anticipate.

### Staying Alive

Teaching can be repetitive and predictable. Fighting the proclivity for safety and sameness can be surprisingly hard: change is filled with risk and even failure.

Yet change also creates disruption to charge our creativity, challenges us with unexpected obstacles to fire our imaginations and locates and privileges colleagues who are unafraid of everything but complacency. In fact, the worst outcome is not failure—it's stagnation.

The two initiatives I've described are not for the professionally fearful. And these are but two of half a dozen large-scale initiatives that are charging our imaginations at school this year. We are poised and even hungry for creative disruption. That's our mindset of staying alive—institutionally, individually, intellectually and spiritually.



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 AVIVA  
ADLER

# THE DAY SCHOOL LIBRARY

## VITAL LINK BETWEEN INFORMATION AND THE CLASSROOM

Most educators acknowledge that libraries are a crucial component of a functioning and well-run school. Most do, but unfortunately not all—not by a long shot. It's a sad fact that when budget cuts are required (as they so often are), libraries, along with programs like art and music, are among the first things to be eliminated.

Day school administrators often have to manipulate finances with all the dexterity and aplomb of a Ringling Brothers Circus juggler. When staring at the bottom line, they are tempted to cut the ostensibly negligible “perk” of the school library or library/media center.

This is a big mistake.

In this era of changing and emerging technology, libraries are more crucial than ever. A trained school librarian (or school library media specialist) works in conjunction with teachers and administrators to enrich the curriculum, plan lessons, create interdisciplinary programs, and generally support the atmosphere of learning and education that a school values.

The librarian is a bridge from student to teacher to administration. He or she is trained to be resourceful, to both create and implement programming that is fun as well as educational, and that enthralls students, teachers and parents alike.

There are endless options for teacher-librarian and administration-librarian collaboration. As a high school librarian, I create pathfinders and research guidelines for teachers on a regular basis, organizing research and resources geared toward a specific project, which I often help a teacher create. I then go into the classroom (or invite students to the library) and walk them through the research process for that particular project or paper. Instead of students floundering about with the research method, a librarian will ground them, point them in the right direction and give them a running start. It goes without saying the quality of work turned in by these students just can't compare with students who aren't provided with research guidelines and training. Guess how many of them will just Google it?

Even before teachers assign research papers and projects, a librarian is the perfect person to help formulate those assignments. I've designed a

plagiarism prevention workshop, helping teachers to craft assignments which are plagiarism-proof and to get creative with the wording and presentation of assignments so students wouldn't even know how to begin to plagiarize. Here is where the tech-savvy librarian plays an ideal role. In the 21st century, assignments can involve photos, videos, music and other forms of multimedia instead of pen and paper. Not only are those types of assignments harder to plagiarize, but any contemporary librarian worth her salt has already integrated those types of media into the research process.

Librarians devote much time to collection development. By meeting with teachers and administrators, they can focus and streamline that process to ensure that the library's books reflect the educational values of the school. The nonfiction collection should support what teachers discuss and assign. The fiction collection should be varied enough to reach students of all ages, interests and levels. And providing access to age-appropriate and reliable online resources is the school librarian's *raison d'être*.

School librarians have mountains of ideas to make reading and books enjoyable for students—all students, not just the J.K. Rowling addicts. Displays, contests, 3D printers and makerspaces, storytimes for the little ones and movie nights for the teens: the school library and its librarian are chock full of programming ideas to bring children into the library and introduce them to the magical process that is reading for pleasure. Events I have worked on, planned, or I'm just keeping in my pocket for a rainy day include author visits and guest speaker events, book clubs, Internet safety workshops, reading challenges, and social media outreach to students.

There's a longstanding tradition of literacy and education in Judaism. Jewish parents are commanded to teach their children—and how can one teach without being at least somewhat learned? The People of the Book become meaningless if the Children of the Book aren't given access to, well, books!





An up-to-date library collection, educational and religious literacy, and a love of reading go hand in hand.

According to Evans, Kelly and Sikora (“Scholarly Culture and Academic Performance in 42 Nations,” *Social Forces* 92.4), there’s a proven connection between access to books and educational level; not even wealth is a stronger factor in predicting educational achievement. For Jewish day schools, this relationship is thrown into even sharper relief: a school library full of interesting, exciting and relevant books means a degree of knowledge about what books mean, what they can do, how important they are and how to treat them. Respect for books is respect for learning, and by extension, respect for the traditions of the People of the Book.

In a perfect world, every Jewish home would be overflowing with works of Torah in the original Hebrew. Children and their parents would be familiar with the most esoteric of commentaries and would be comfortable reading works of parshanut and Halakhah in the original Hebrew, Aramaic, Yiddish or Ladino. We don’t live in a perfect world. A child who has no access to actual Tanakh, Talmud, traditional liturgy, Hebrew poetry, responsa etc. at home should be able to correct that lack at school. It’s part of the reason we send our children to Jewish day schools in the first place.

Which begs the question: how do these ancient and beautiful sources fit into our contemporary, increasingly digital world? Is there any overlap at all between the Dead Sea Scrolls and a library coding workshop or a makerspace with a 3D printer?

Of course there is—just ask your librarian!

Creating and maintaining a school library with not only secular electronic resources but *Judaic* ones is the perfect way to bring the past and the present, and maybe even the future, together. Students can interact with digital scans

of the original Mishnah Torah signed by Maimonides at [HaRambam.org](http://HaRambam.org) to connect with him as a historical person. Or watch the geography of ancient and medieval Israel come to life at Old Maps Online ([oldmapsonline.org/en/Israel](http://oldmapsonline.org/en/Israel)). Sefaria.org is constantly updating their databases of full-text Tanakh, Talmud, Midrash with English translations—all open-source. Imagine what a skilled librarian could supplement that with, once given the ability to subscribe to paid Judaic databases.

For the first time in more than fifty years, the federal government is beginning to acknowledge the importance of school libraries and librarians. This past December, ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act) was signed into law, providing federal revenue for school libraries to enhance services and resources. Librarians are officially recognized as “specialized instructional support personnel.” Since so much of library work is invisible, this is no small accomplishment, and it’s a step towards recognizing the absolutely vital function of libraries in schools.

Libraries will keep moving forward as the way people obtain and process information continues to evolve. More and more, children are being exposed to huge masses of information on a daily basis. Who better to teach them information literacy and critical evaluation skills than those sentries of information, librarians? Through access to school libraries, students can grow up assessing digital content and making good choices. And in Jewish places of learning, Judaic and digital resources will continue to overlap, change, evolve and grow, becoming ever more seamlessly integrated for the coming generations. Anticipating this by emphasizing the value of the library towards your school’s mission is the most prescient thing a Jewish day school administrator can do.

# JEWISH SOURCES AS A GUIDE TO CURRICULUM AND PEDAGOGY

It is told of the Kotzker Rebbe that he was once asked by one of his students, “Where is God?” He answered, “Wherever we let him in.” Similarly, if we ask, “Where is our Judaism expressed?” We can answer, “Wherever we let it in.”

Jewish sources contain instructions for life. When teachers connect any subject, Jewish or secular, to Jewish culture, they highlight and expand the extent to which Judaism is a “Torah for life,” even in the twenty-first century. Jewish culture is an essential part of every aspect of life; its relevance is not limited to specifically Jewish subjects.

Several years ago, I facilitated a learning group on issues related to day-to-day life. After choosing a topic I asked two questions:

**1. What does Jewish culture have to say about this topic?** The search process was fascinating, leading to the discovery of a variety of sources that revealed widely differing perspectives.

**2. How can the texts be woven together in a way that brings to life practical insights?** This question was more difficult. It accompanied me wherever I went, beyond the hours of preparation in front of books and the computer. I found myself preoccupied with it while shopping, in the doctor’s waiting room, in the playground.

And then, for the first time, I understood that the verse “Thou shalt meditate therein day and night” had an additional layer of meaning. For me, having studied as a young girl in religious schools, the familiar verse had one (rather narrow) meaning, transmitted by my teachers: one should sit and study Torah all day. We learned this from the verse in Joshua (1:8): “Let not this Book of the Teaching cease from your lips, but recite it day and night, so that you may observe faithfully all that is written in it. Only then will you prosper in your undertakings and only then will you be successful.”

We can see Jewish literature, in its manifold forms, as a source of inspiration and discussion not just for the classic Jewish studies curriculum but also in a wide range of areas. Jewish sources can inform lessons related to non-Jewish subjects, such as social studies, literature, sociology, history, science and more. They encourage learning and curiosity, inspire appreciation, supply insights about life and about the challenges that our students face in their lives in general, and with educational challenges in particular.

The difficulty that faces us in this task is that when we open the Jewish classics, the Bible, Mishnah and Talmud, we find that many of the issues that occupy us today are not systematically discussed. There is no Jewish procedure for writing a lesson plan or for classroom management. Even if stories appear in the Talmud about teachers and contexts of learning, they offer no method for relating to our diverse students.

From Judaism’s vast literature, we need to gather the texts that will guide us in our work. We will become increasingly proficient in this task to the extent that we deepen our learning and turn to Jewish sources in search of answers. For the most part, the sources we find will not deal directly with a topic. We will have to

learn and understand the source as it appears in its original context, then study the ways it has been interpreted, and finally to charge it with a new interpretation relevant to our lives, one that can help us meet the many and varied challenges of teaching and learning. Here are a few examples that I have drawn up.

## ENCOURAGING LEARNING AND CURIOSITY

Said Rabbi: A man can learn [well] only that part of the Torah that is in the place of his heart’s desire, for it is said (Psalms 1:2), “Rather, the teaching of the Lord is his delight” (Avoda Zara 19a).

Rashi comments, “*Only that part of the Torah that is in the place of his heart’s desire*—his teacher should only teach him a tractate that he [the student] asks for, because if he teaches him a different tractate he will not progress according to the stages of his desire.” Rashi explains that there is no point in teaching a student a tractate that he has not asked to learn, because his heart will attend to his own private desires.

What this means for us is that if we succeed in adopting the idea of the “place of his heart’s desire,” and in applying it wherever we can, while preparing a lesson and during the lesson itself, we will enable our students to be “in the place of their heart’s desire,” thereby encouraging their curiosity and learning.

Learning that starts from the student’s natural curiosity is good for both the student and teacher. Students who study out of curiosity will be glad to expand their knowledge and will internalize it naturally. The teacher will enjoy enthusiastic, participating and attentive students. While it is true that most of the topics of study are chosen for us, if we nonetheless create mechanisms for choice within those topics, within each lesson—choice from among the sources/exercises we learn, or in what homework to do—we will find that the students’ enthusiasm and curiosity tend to increase. When we create situations in which students can choose, and teachers respond to their choices, we preserve and strengthen the natural curiosity for learning, or as Rashi notes, the desire for learning in general.

The word “place” can also be interpreted as an actual seat in which one sits. Most classrooms in Israel have fixed seating, with the teacher sometimes changing seating arrangements in accordance with the needs of the class. It would be interesting to teach this principle to children and then allow them to choose where they want to sit for the lesson. Students can then reflect upon the relationship between the interpretation and the classroom experiment.

Of course it is possible to interpret the words “place of his heart’s desire” in additional ways: learning through songs that the children listen to, from topics that occupy them (even if they are related to passing fads), or from direct conversations with them about what interests them.



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## THE ADVANTAGES OF NOT KNOWING

“Rabbi Isaac also said: A blessing is found only in what is hidden from the eye, for it is written, “The Lord shall command the blessing upon thee in thy hidden things.” The School of Rabbi Ishmael taught: A blessing comes only to that over which the eye has no power... Our rabbis taught: When one goes to measure [the corn in] his granary, he should pray, ‘May it be Thy will, O Lord our God, to send a blessing upon the work of our hands.’ Having started to measure, he prays, ‘Blessed is He who sendeth a blessing on this pile.’ But if he measured and then prayed, it is a vain prayer, because a blessing is not found in that which is [already] weighed, measured or counted, but only in that which is hidden from the eye” (Bava Metzia 42b).

Rabbi Isaac brings support for his statement from the verse “The Lord will ordain blessings for you upon your granaries and upon all your undertakings: He will bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you” (Deuteronomy 28:8; “granaries” is understood as “hidden things”). The verse relates to God’s blessing as relating specifically to produce in the barn. In other words, the produce in the barn that is hidden from the eyes of the public is the blessed produce, as Rabbi Ishmael goes on to explain: “A blessing comes only to that over which the eye has no power.” The sages explain that one who measures his produce and then prays for it is making a vain prayer because he is referring to something that has been measured, and that which is measured is visible and therefore cannot be blessed.

Our sages’ determination has significance for us. In our society today, there are quite a few situations in which we seek quick and absolute answers to issues that disturb us. In an age of smartphones, Google and fast food, we need everything we want to be here and now. Not infrequently, it is difficult for us to bear ambiguity, to wait for answers to emerge, to spend several days with an unresolved issue. Ambiguity is generally perceived as a problem that needs to be solved, and quickly.

I suggest that we see a blessing in all those ambiguous things that are “hidden from the eye,” “over which the eye has no power”—those things that cannot be measured. That which is hidden from the eye requires us to think again, to strive for an answer, to engage in a process of inquiry that can develop in new and surprising directions. This is in contrast to those things for which we already know the answer, where there is no movement, where we cast no doubt, and where in any case there can be nothing new and no blessing. There is something frozen and uncreative in knowing something, in knowing the answer, in having total clarity.

Ambiguity, in contrast, contains the potential for many directions for renewal and blessing. For example, students who think they know the material will rarely bother to open a book, whereas a student who faces ambiguity and nonetheless does not despair will open the book and learn, and will find success.

From a pedagogical perspective, when we utilize complex and sophisticated questions, puzzles, riddles or surprising challenges in processes of learning and inquiry, we are artificially creating an experience of “hidden from the eye” to motivate inquiry and learning.

The experience of learning and development as matters that are “hidden from the eye,” and understanding ambiguity as a source of blessing, can encourage and comfort those who sense despair or weakness in the face of an issue they do not understand, or an unresolved issue (and don’t we all feel this sometimes, in school or in other areas of life?). Internalization of the understanding that there is blessing in frustrating situations, and that in the future we will have greater clarity, can be helpful in such trying times.

The fact that there is no blessing in what is measured can also be applied to student evaluation. Alternative evaluation, like a verbal-formative comment, from which a student can learn his strong points as well as the challenges that he faces, leaves room for the student’s “hidden from the eye.” In this way we can show students that they can reach their own hidden resources, from which they will see great blessing.

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## IMPORTANT STEPS ON THE WAY TO THE GOAL

**“Akavia the son of Mahalalel would say: Reflect upon three things and you will not come to the hands of transgression. Know from where you came, where you are going, and before whom you are destined to give a judgment and accounting.** From where you came—from a putrid drop; where you are going—to a place of dust, maggots and worms; and before whom you are destined to give a judgment and accounting—before the supreme King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He” (Pirkei Avot 3:1).

Professor Zev Safrai showed that Akavia’s saying included only the words in bold; the second part of the Mishnah became the accepted commentary, concluding with an accounting that will take place before the Creator of the world. Akavia’s original utterance can be applied to many situations in our lives. It can be explained in the following way:

*Reflect upon three things and you will not come to the hands of transgression:* If you want to avoid missing the goal, you must pay attention to three things:

*From where you came:* What is your point of departure? Where do you stand now (including beliefs, thoughts, basic assumptions) in relation to the goal that you want to achieve?

*Where are you going:* What exactly is the goal? Not infrequently we think the goal is clear to us, but a deeper examination can bring light to a totally different destination.

*Before whom you are destined to give a judgment and accounting:* To whom will you need to give explanations about what happened between your point of departure and your destination?

We can ask students to analyze various life situations of their choice—such as studying for a test, doing homework, or fighting with a friend—while inquiring into each separate stage. In this way, the Mishnah can provide the basis for important lessons about how planning and drawing conclusions can be critical in achieving goals that we really desire.

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## WHERE IS OUR JUDAISM EXPRESSED? WHEREVER WE LET IT IN.

In this way, Jewish principles can be integrated into whatever subject we teach. Many more such principles can be found that can be integrated into classroom life, and all teachers can choose principles upon which they wish to focus.

In order that the principles will indeed become part of our own and our students’ Jewish life experience, it is important to pay attention to three different stages.

First, we need to learn the source and the different commentaries and teach it in its original form, from a stance of respect and appreciation for the early authors and the commentators throughout the generations.

Second, we introduce a new interpretation that applies to learning and life. We can also have a discussion with the students in which we enable them to uncover their own additional interpretations and understandings of the chosen principle. By adding a new interpretation, we become partners in the continuation of Jewish creation, an experience that can be a source of great satisfaction.

Third, we explain to the students how we will implement the principle in practice, which is also an ancient and important principle in Jewish culture. The three stages create a connection to the past, extend a principle into the present, lead to its internalization for the future.

As it says in Pirkei Avot 4:5: “Rabbi Ishmael the son of Rabbi Yossi would say: One who learns Torah in order to teach, is given the opportunity to learn and teach. One who learns in order to do, is given the opportunity to learn, teach, observe and do.”

May we merit this!

ILANA  
LIPMAN

# ONLINE CURRICULA

## LITERACY WITH FLEXIBILITY

It was about 30 seconds before the bell rang to signal the beginning of class when Matan approached me. “Mrs. Lipman?” I held my breath. Poor Matan. He was such a curious, thoughtful, hard-working student. I knew he had spent more time than any other student studying for the Shmuel Bet test. It seemed almost unfair to write that B- on the top of his exam, yet rubrics are rubrics and Matan had failed to satisfy the requirements that were demanded to attain an A or an A-. Matan knew that many of his peers had likely scored better grades than he, yet he still came to class full of enthusiasm. I mentally prepared myself for Matan to ask how he could improve his grade and how I could answer him without discouraging him.

But his comment surprised me. He did not ask me about his grade.

“Mrs. Lipman, you will never believe what I read over the weekend. I was reading some of the eulogies, and I couldn’t believe how similar they were to the eulogy that David gave to Shaul and Yonatan. It’s like...it’s almost like David *inspired* our leaders. Do you think the President knows any of the Shmuel Bet stories?”

Matan was referring to the recent assignment he had received in History class. The assignment asked students to explore some eulogies given by world leaders following tragic deaths.

Matan, going above and beyond the requirements of the assignment, had connected his history assignment—and the news—to our study of Shmuel Bet. There was no rubric criteria available for synthesizing knowledge from multiple subjects and comparing it to events from current events. Matan’s strengths and curiosity were not rewarded by assignment grades, and yet it seemed to me that he deserved to receive credit for his efforts and creative thinking.

Six years later, through my work at the Lookstein Virtual Jewish Academy, I understand how online courses can benefit and reward students like Matan. Quality online learning programs provide both a set curriculum that covers all standards/benchmarks that are deemed necessary to master a specific subject while simultaneously catering to the students’ curiosity and interest, ultimately allowing them to carve their own paths of learning based on what fascinates them. Specifically, when constructing a shared conception of Jewish literacy and translating it into a curriculum, online and digital learning environments can be even more powerful than traditional approaches.

A good online course includes a set curriculum with clear, measurable objectives, as well as content that teaches towards these objectives. It requires formative assessment throughout, ensuring that students master each piece of the material before moving on to a new subject. Well-written online materials carefully guide students to move from the lower levels of Bloom’s taxonomy—remembering and understanding—to the higher levels of evaluation and creation.

In a traditional classroom setting, the teacher chooses to focus on particular aspects of a given curriculum and skip other aspects (with or without regard to student interest) and also determines the pace of the course. In the online classroom, however, the student covers all mandatory aspects of the curriculum, and it is the student—as opposed to the teacher—who determines the direction and pace of the course. Students are therefore neither bored nor overwhelmed; rather, they are consistently challenged in a way that motivates them to want to learn more.

For example, imagine that a core Jewish literacy curriculum includes information about the shofar—what it is, when it is sounded, and what is its meaning. A student who is interested in design and engineering for example, might be interested in learning how to make a shofar. Lucky for that student, the online course provides links to a video workshop that the student can watch and learn how to make his own shofar. The student can make the shofar, snap some photographs, and send them out to his peers in his online classroom. Meanwhile, another student is fascinated by different types of shofarot around the world, so she follows a link to a video of a shofar factory in Northern Israel that showcases a museum of shofarot. She muses about the range of shofarot in a discussion post. Both students come out of the lesson with the basic knowledge of what is a shofar, when and how it is used. And each student has the opportunity to explore a specific aspect of shofar that fascinates him/her and shares this with peers.

Online curricula is unique in that it can simultaneously construct a shared conception of Jewish literacy and maintain flexibility so that students can explore their passions and interests, as opposed to traditional curricula that may present a curriculum but cannot reach individual students with their own diverse learning interests. Part of why online learning can achieve these goals is because it can incorporate a range of resources that appeal to different learning modalities, as opposed to the linear nature of traditional curricula. Ultimately, flexibility is one of the key characteristics of online learning. The core curriculum remains the same, but the ways in which students can access, practice and master the material are endless. The student becomes the master of his/her own learning process. The teacher takes on a new role as well—no longer the “sage on the stage,” the teacher becomes the “guide on the side,” evaluating data and student work, then providing students with the tools that they need to access and master material. Students create their own material, share new ideas with their cohorts, and obtain constructive feedback regarding those ideas.

One might well argue that a talented and experienced teacher who knows how to differentiate should be able to solve these challenges using traditional curricula. While it is true that a differentiated classroom does allow all different types of learners to feel challenged in school, there are limitations. Often the material is still teacher-driven—the teacher assigns the students specific tasks to complete, or content to read. The reality often becomes that students with the most diverse learning needs work independently, remaining in the physical classroom but engaging in different activities than the majority of their peers.

Online learning, through its variety of different models, can offer solutions to these challenges. For example, many online learning

models expose students to optional enrichment opportunities from which they can choose. These may take the form of supplemental articles to read, games to play that enable students to master a particular skill set, videos to watch that bring to life a specific concept, a group websites to explore, and more. Students pursue their own paths within the course, while still feeling part of a classroom community. How? They work in cohorts, collaborating with like-minded peers across the country and even around the world. Students take charge of their own learning: pursuing items of interest, sharing their discoveries with their peers, and thereby enriching the learning experience for everyone.

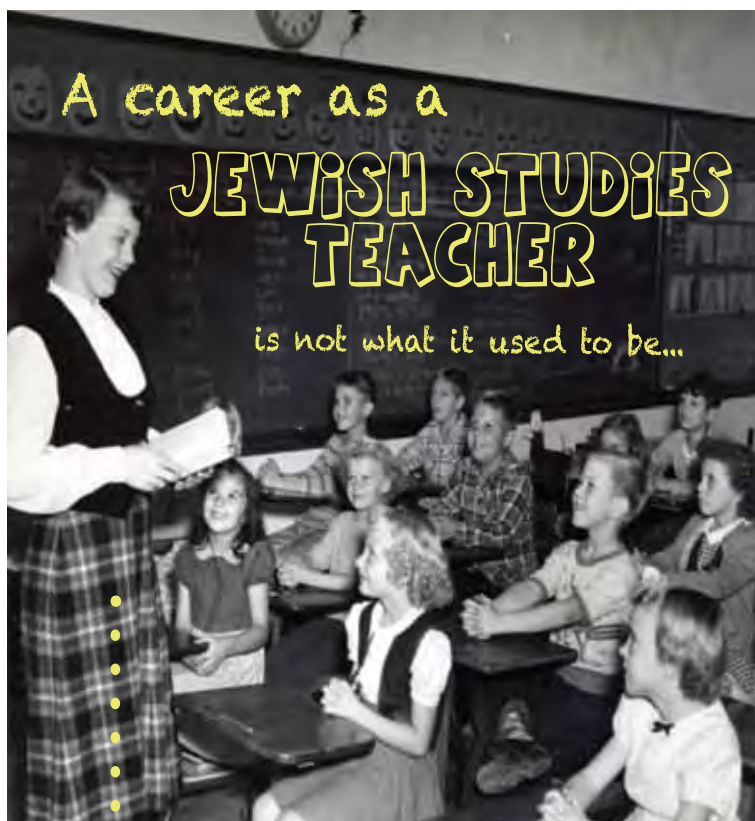
What about students who do not show an interest in optional materials? These students may find themselves clicking on an item just because another student pointed it out. This in itself is a paradigm shift—just as teachers move from “sages” to “guides,” the students become seekers, learning how to both take charge of their own learning and make sense of content independently in a way that makes sense to them.

This paradigm shift can be greatly helpful when considering how to construct a Jewish literacy curriculum. Jewish literacy is a collection of facts: identifying artifacts, memorizing brakhot and the situations in which they are appropriate, classifying Jewish texts, locating the source of a quotation and contextualizing it, etc. But literacy is almost meaningless unless students relate it to themselves. Unless I get my feet wet or my hands dirty, I am left with a fact collection. Student agency allows all students to select directions that are of interest to them so that they can then link facts to their beings. Online learning is one method of promoting that student agency.

It is important to note that iNACOL's (International Association for K-12 Online Learning, [www.inacol.org](http://www.inacol.org)) national standards for online courses include several rubrics for programs, course development, and course instruction. These rubrics assert that content choice and enrichment are neither afterthoughts nor footnotes; rather, they are built into all high quality online courses. The following are some examples:

- “The course is organized by units and lessons that fall into a logical sequence. Each unit and lesson includes an overview describing objectives, activities, assignments, assessments, and resources to provide multiple learning opportunities for students to master the content.” (Standard B2)
- “The course and course instructor provide students with multiple learning paths, based on student needs that engage students in a variety of ways.” (Standard B4)
- “Students have access to resources that enrich the course content. A wide variety of supplemental tools and resources are clearly identified and readily available within the learning management system.” (Standard B11)

Students today have so much choice about the content and sources of information that they listen to, read, and watch. They have become conditioned to expecting almost unlimited options, yet traditional approaches to learning continue to limit these choices. It is unnatural for today's students to have no (or at best, limited) choices or no avenue to explore their interests within a particular framework. Fortunately, online learning is able to meet the needs of today's student consumers and allow them to challenge, to be challenged, and to engage with their Judaic studies classes. In the words of one of LVJA's high school students, “I really liked how we got to learn at our own pace and in different ways. I thought it was very interesting, and different from a normal Tanakh class. I think I like learning like this better than how I normally learn Tanakh.” May it be that all of our students find points of engagement and interest in their Jewish learning.



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DEBORAH  
SKOLNICK EINHORN

# PLANNING THE UNPLANNABLE

## WHEN LIFE INTERRUPTS THE CURRICULUM

“Gilles” and “Laila,” 15-year-old Parisians being played by two Hebrew College graduate students, were planning an intrigue. Having played these roles in a virtual courtroom on a virtual Masada for almost two months, Gilles and Laila were concerned that the case was slanted *too much* in their favor. While most players in a virtual game or moot court would be thrilled to have the case clearly going their way, Gilles and Laila were not simply players out to win, they were also mentors and teachers in the Jewish Court of All Time. In this role, their work to enhance middle schoolers’ civil discourse, empathy and historical knowledge trumped their drive to ‘win’ the case. The intrigue and drama they were planning, therefore, actually sought to create a more balanced case—thus putting their victory in jeopardy.

The Jewish Court of All Time (JCAT), a RAVSAK program funded by the Covenant Foundation, is a simulated Jewish moot court case. Through an online platform across two dozen Jewish day schools and four graduate schools of education, students assume historical and current personas. They become speechmakers, respondents, witnesses and justices in deciding a complex case. The graduate student “mentor” characters probe the thinking of middle schoolers with regard to their role-playing and critical thinking. As my participant observation of the Jewish Court of All Time reveals, the defining moments of this year’s case were not the director-driven exhibits and witnesses, nor the mentor-driven intrigues, but rather the intrusion of real-world news and tragedies.

Gilles Blum and Laila Mokeddem, the lead (fictional) characters in this year’s case, bring suit against the State of France. Both have been barred from public school for wearing “ostentatious” religious symbols, namely kippah and hijab. The French statute seeks to retain the secular nature (*laïcité*) of its public institutions by restricting individual expressions of religion, a concept which was foreign and troubling to many of the American and Canadian Jewish middle school students playing JCAT. In an attempt to keep the case engaging and interesting, and to help create more empathy for French *laïcité*, Gilles and Laila were doing some “gamemaking.” Working with their graduate colleagues and instructor (myself), the mentor characters drafted a series of dramatic posts and responses which accused Gilles of being caught around town without his kippah. In a virtual world built on Gilles’ moral certitude and unwavering religious commitment, this would be cause for alarm (and for reconsidering one’s view on the slam-dunk case).

But two days before this manufactured drama was set to unfold on JCAT’s Masada, the series of attacks in France brought the real world—and particularly Paris—to a halt. This horrific tragedy had virtual world implications, for the characters in JCAT but also for the middle schoolers, graduate students and teachers behind them. As Nance Adler, a veteran JCAT teacher at the Jewish Day School of Metropolitan Seattle, wrote to her colleagues, “We wanted the pot stirred. Reality has stirred it for us.” We were suddenly faced with the challenge of planning the unplannable, of integrating (or not) a major tragedy into a *game*, of using the moment to deepen students’ experiences without *leveraging* another country’s loss, and of bringing today into a virtual world that existed “out of time.” To better understand how the JCAT players reacted in the wake of the Paris attacks, both in and out of the game, we will briefly explore student and mentor reflections and reactions. We believe this has broader implications for experiential educators, practitioners using serious games, and any educator who seeks to integrate current world events into their history, social studies and Jewish studies classrooms.

Despite immediate and lengthy deliberations among the game’s teachers, mentors and directors, students were the first to mark the attacks in the context of the game. By early Monday morning—as mentors and teachers continued to debate the best course of action—characters as diverse as Lady Gaga and Marine LePen posted condolences and calls for solidarity with the French. Students changed their JCAT profiles to the newly iconic image of an Eiffel Tower peace sign or the French flag. This seemed to be quietly contagious. Scrolling through their moving posts and seeing these unprompted changes, we were struck by students’ simple, unplanned yet incredibly powerful gestures.



## EXCEPTION, ENCHANTMENT, EMBRACE

Meanwhile, in online teacher and mentor discussions, the games' adults struggled with how to (and whether to) move the game forward in light of these events. Within hours of the attacks, emails and discussion posts began flying among the game's teaching staff. As the teachers considered how to help their students reflect on and process these incredibly "close-to-game" events, the mentors stepped into their role as real-time gamemakers. They ultimately put aside the texts—the planned curriculum—which they had carefully constructed for their manufactured intrigue, which felt petty in the face of actual events.

Mentors, who had been considering the game through the lens of experiential education for the previous two months, came to the discussion with three dramatically different points of view. The first respondent—a prominent character in the game—articulated a need to step out of character to acknowledge the tragedy: "I wanted to acknowledge Friday night's tragedy to everyone in JCAT—out of character—to mention it and say how sorry we all are. Then we can proceed with the game." In a game that is predicated on always staying within character, this "exception" is to some extent radical. She articulates a desire to "pause" the game by coming out of character, to do justice to the victims. Only then, she articulates, can we "proceed with the game."

The mentor is concerned that, in some ways, the simulation game cannot hold this kind of real-world tragedy. Further, she believes that stepping out of character will discourage students who are "tempted to respond in character with something inappropriate." After stating her reaction firmly, she added, "What do you think?" Another

student supported this approach "out of respect for those who died in Paris over the weekend." Her advocacy for this exception to being in character spawned two additional camps: enchantment and embrace.

Pushing back on the idea of stepping out of character and of discussing the Paris attacks, one mentor—an avocational gamer and simulation devotee—advocated maintaining the enchantment of the JCAT out-of-time environment:

*It is something that went through my mind as I was learning about the tragedy. Given some of our more . . . foul characters, I think I'd prefer to avoid it altogether. Trump and Gibson will make a mess of it. Plus, it's sort of irrelevant to the case, I think.*

Since JCAT is a simulated environment whose temporal boundaries are very flexible (Moses interacting with Ruth Bader Ginsburg is not exactly within the bounds of chronology), there is an inherent suspension of reality. Ignoring an event in the present moment, therefore, is perfectly reasonable in this setting. But, as his classmates would soon ask, is it optimal?

Students respectfully pushed back on both of these classmates and began advocating for a third approach: *embrace*. Arguing for the relevance of the Paris attacks to the case for secularism, another avocational gamer argued for "allowing" reality to burst the JCAT bubble: "If anything, I think that the attacks will make the *laïcité* argument even more real for the students. It's easy to feel accepting and progressive in times of peace, but far more challenging in situations of fear and high emotion." Responding to his classmates' concerns about potentially offensive comments by characters, he opted to embrace those, too: "I think that we should be open to the potentially uglier arguments that might follow, since there

are already a lot of ugly arguments in and around France right now." When pushed by a student advocating for exception who asked *how* to ensure everyone's emotional safety within the game, the embrace advocate argued to trust the students: "These are middle school students. I have faith in their ability to see the importance of the discussion and not be traumatized by the reality of it. We should gently encourage a conversation and let it unfold as it will."

This dialogue evolved with more supporters of embrace, heeding the argument of trusting the students (and the classroom teachers scaffolding the game for them in-person) and being vulnerable to some difficult comments. Notably, both exception and enchantment were driven in part by a concern for what complex or offensive characters might say in response. But as I observed this evolution, I noticed that while some of the earliest posters expressed the same concern about embrace, the support of their classmates and co-mentors, and a discussion about the educational benefits and calculated risks, brought them on board. Ultimately, this collective process of reflection, projection and strategy allowed them to feel safe—and confident that they could make the student characters feel safe—even while allowing the Paris attacks to pierce the JCAT enchantment bubble. These out-of-game discussions helped them to plan the unplannable and to come to terms with their own personal reactions as individuals before making the optimal choice for their student mentees.

Sadly, reality did stir the pot in this year's game. These experiential educators-in-training learned—from the students' immediate responses and from their own collective process—how to guide the spoon together, thickening and enriching the game and its learning immeasurably.

# LITERACY DAY

“Reading is important, because if you can read, you can learn anything about everything and everything about anything.” So said Tomie dePaola, renowned author of over 200 children’s books, and as a reading specialist, I couldn’t agree more. Yet do high school students today recognize the importance of reading? Do they enjoy reading? With all the demands on their time and attention, particularly in a dual curriculum high school, students sometimes turn to shortcuts rather than reading entire books, and even highly proficient readers complain that they have little time to read for pleasure. In an effort to put the fun back in reading and to demonstrate the many ways that literacy enriches our lives, Kohelet Yeshiva High School held its first annual Literacy Day program this past November.

What is literacy? Defined not only as the ability to read and write, literacy also signifies competence or knowledge in a specified area. Through a choice of a dozen workshops, Kohelet students had opportunities to read and write in a relaxed and fun way as well as a chance to explore new ideas and new fields of knowledge. Workshop topics ranged across the curriculum and beyond, from learning to read music to having a conversation in Aramaic, from becoming philosophically literate to focusing on the power of language by playing word games.

For this first effort, I created a list of potential topics and then refined the list through consultation with other faculty members and with a student coordinator, Noa Batya Spero, whom I recruited in order to have student input and leadership for the event.

A voracious reader and prolific creative writer, Noa Batya led a workshop on “Flash Fiction,” which she described as follows: “If you have always loved to write but can’t commit to a novel or short story, then Flash Fiction is for you! In Flash Fiction you are given a character, setting and plot and then off you go, straight into the clutches of a story. These stories will be short and they will be many. We invite you to come and write to the very last word or at least until the time is up!”

Some session topics related directly to the curriculum and provided students with an opportunity to delve more deeply into a subject or to explore something familiar from a different perspective. For example, students attending the “Reading Rashi” workshop wrestled with this question: “What

LEA  
KEIL GARSON

makes Rashi’s commentary timeless and relevant to six-year-old schoolchildren through mature adults as a necessary tool for learning Torah?” For a twist on the usual approach to studying Aramaic, another workshop trained students in “How to Have an Argument in Aramaic”: “Come to this workshop to experience Aramaic as not only the written language of Gemara but as what used to be a ‘living’ language. You’ll have fun and will probably enhance your Gemara skills along the way.” In a seminar on modern Hebrew poetry, a group performed a close analysis of “two poems from one of Israel’s greatest poets, Yehuda Amichai, that connect us with modern Israel through his poetic interpretation of our tradition.”

Other sessions addressed areas not covered by the curriculum, such as visual literacy and philosophical literacy. Teachers might choose to incorporate elements of these workshops into the curriculum in the future, both in general studies and Judaic studies classes, or even to offer a new elective. Next year, to foster greater cross-curricular connections, some workshops that did not have specifically Jewish content this year could be co-led by a member of the Judaic Studies faculty.

Language of all kinds was a major focus of the event. Many students took advantage of the chance to begin to learn a programming language. The challenge was framed thus: “Imagine trying to communicate with someone who has very limited language ability... Computers only “understand” a very limited number of commands, and yet, look what programmers have taught them to do! Come and test your ability to communicate instructions using a computer programming language. Also, see if you can follow the computer’s instructions!”

Most popular of all was the “Word Games Workshop,” during which students chose from a wide array of games that included Hebrew Banagrams and the Jewish edition of Apples to Apples. A reading marathon and workshops on Shakespeare and wordplay rounded out the choices for the day.

The program was well received by students and faculty alike. Workshop leaders reported a high degree of student engagement, and students appreciated the variety of options available to them. Typical of Jewish day schools in general, Kohelet’s students and teachers have a long day, a full curriculum and much to accomplish in each individual subject area. Programs such as Literacy Day can provide an added opportunity to step back and see the big picture of interdisciplinary study and real-world applications.

Just as important, these special programs can open students up to new fields of interest. When it is possible to try out a subject for one workshop session rather than committing to a semester or a full year, students might be more willing to take an intellectual risk. The Literacy Day program also gave teachers a chance to explore different subjects and to connect with students in a fresh way. For example, an English teacher led the workshop on visual literacy and a math teacher led the one on philosophical literacy. This type of teaching inspires students by example and underscores the value of lifelong learning.

A pilot venture this year, Literacy Day started small, with time carved out from the school day for two 45-minute workshops with a ten-minute break between. Going forward, a half-day of workshops might be combined with all-school activities such as an author panel as well as chesed projects that relate to literacy. To extend its impact, Literacy Day could be used to launch a school book club and a “One Book, One Kohelet” communitywide reading event. As with literacy itself, the possibilities are limitless.



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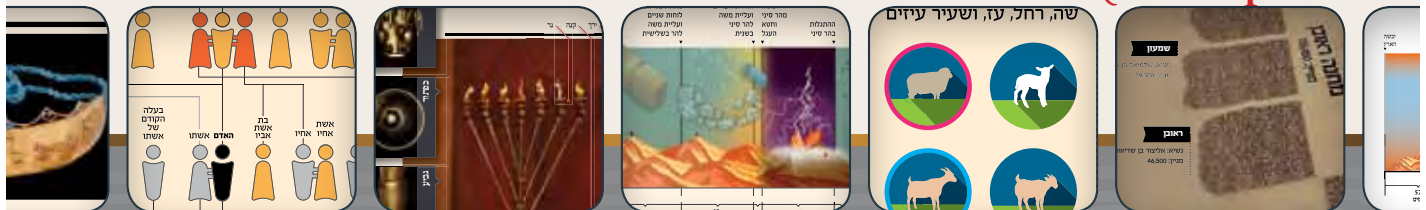
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LARRY KUTLER

# THINKING JEWISHLY

## THE ROLE OF STUDENT PROGRAMS IN A JUDAICS CURRICULUM

Jewish day schools are in a unique position to transmit the Jewish tradition to their students in an environment that is nurturing, inquisitive and embedded with elements of excellence. If we were successful in this transmission and linked our chain to the Torah that was revealed to Moshe and transmitted to Joshua, etc., we would have fulfilled our duties and we could collectively say “dayyenu.” However, it is not enough. We would not be preparing our students for the challenges that await them on campus and in the workplace. Students need to learn to work in groups, think critically and imaginatively. One excellent way that schools can help their students gain 21st century skills and achieve vital Jewish objectives is through participation in outstanding student programming.

Our schools are tasked with twin responsibilities in the educational domain. The first is to deliver a first-class secular education that rivals our competitors in the private and public school systems. This would include all the disciplines of the Western canon, namely math, science, language and literature, and the arts, with STEM as a welcome recent addition. The second is to impart the Jewish canon, which includes Torah, rabbinics, Israel study, Hebrew language, etc. Most day schools deliver on both canons to the general satisfaction of the student and parent bodies. Here too we could say dayyenu and claim that we have fulfilled our vision and mission statements. We have completed our curricula.

But have we?

Perhaps our students learn to solve problems, face challenges, and contribute to the general culture. They perform well on standardized tests, at science fairs and artistic competitions. But there is the Jewish canon to consider. Aside from specific texts that we

want students to know and decoding skills we want them to have, I would propose there’s a deeper goal that Jewish day schools aim for: challenging students to *think Jewishly*. Do they graduate with the ability to see the world differently and from an enriched perspective? Thinking Jewishly is a process whereby the student will not look for easy answers to intricate questions. Instead, students will probe texts and sources in order to uncover the right questions and values that propel them to think and struggle.

Thinking Jewishly often leads to further soul searching and reflection. This year’s Moot Beit Din program (discussed below) offers an apt illustration. The case involves a sick person, where action or inaction could prolong the life of a person. Students must probe halakhic sources to determine what should be advised. We are commanded not to stand idly by the blood of our neighbor—what does this mean? What other questions are necessary? What is the role of analogy in determining the moral imperative or the Jewish value? How can these lessons be applied to other circumstances? This process, when properly applied and complemented with the Western logical system, can offer students greater insight and perhaps transform the perplexing system of Jewish law into an enabling one guiding their ethical decision-making.

Over the years RAVSAK has presented many programs to our schools. I want to speak to two of them: Moot Beit Din and Jewish Court of All Time. Do these programs help us to teach our students to think Jewishly, and if so how? What is the Jewish way of thinking? Why is it a benefit to our student body?

The Moot Beit Din is RAVSAK’s high school program in intensive Jewish study. As explained on the RAVSAK website, “Moot Beit Din exposes high school students to the vitality of the Jewish legal system and helps them to fine-tune their critical thinking skills by applying Halakhah (Jewish law) to hot topics such as stem cell research or immigration policy. Grappling with current issues from a rabbinical perspective, students learn to think on their feet, connect the past and the present, and create a compelling case. ... [Teams] produce written arguments. They then present their oral reports and defend their conclusions before a panel of judges while they are all gathered together for a weekend-long Shabbaton.”

I believe that the program does far more. In our school, Herzliya High School in Montreal, it has changed the very culture of the school. Each year 36 students compete for limited spots in the international Moot Beit Din competition. We have our own mini-Moot Beit Din, invite our own judges and allow parents and selected students to see the process unfold. Our students use their free time at lunch, on the weekends, and after school to sharpen their knowledge and learn to think Jewishly. By this I mean, they

grow to understand that simple quick responses to complex questions is not a part of the Jewish tradition. Through havruta work and mentoring, they learn that one studies in order to ask the right questions and to search for the competing values, ways of thinking, and issues that are behind the texts.

The students learn that Jewish thinking, more often than not, leads to further questions and reflection. They force themselves to confront difficult issues and ask how traditional values can compete for a viewpoint. In a Moot Beit Din competition, it is quite common for different groups to argue distinct viewpoints even when using the same texts. Each answer creates another question. Analysis of text is not enough; association and imagination are also prerequisites. This is thinking Jewishly. This is wrestling with the words of God. This is the delivery of the Jewish canon.

The depth of analysis, collaboration and excitement generated by the Moot Beit Din or a similar program can serve as a cornerstone of a curriculum that aims to endow students with the ability to think Jewishly. At Herzliah, we use the program to engage students in a set course of study in order to learn the skills of argument, to acquire the ability to navigate rabbinic texts, to foster the dispositions to work in groups and to create more questions. Students learn to separate the trees from the forest in rabbinic argument. The curriculum is set up to encourage dialectic and expects the students to be inventive and bold. The students learn these skills in the formal classroom and significantly, in their preparation for Moot Beit Din, done on their own time.

In the Shmoneh Esrei prayer we find the phrase *Hashiveinu 'avinu letoratekha*, "May you [God] our Father, return us to your Torah." This Torah is the Torah of thinking Jewishly, the Torah that our

students discover through Moot Beit Din by engaging text on multiple levels and convincing judges that they are erudite and correct.

RAVSAC's middle-school program in Jewish history, the Jewish Court of All Time (JCAT), creates an environment where students are challenged to role play, to think Jewishly and to persuade passionately. (For a fuller description, see the article by Deborah Skolnick Einhorn in this issue.) The use of empathy in role playing is a highlight of this program. Students assume roles and act out the responses of the protagonists. This exploration of historical figures creates a venue for the students to explore the roots of diversity of opinion within the Jewish identity of the characters. Interestingly enough, the Talmud Torah middle schoolers are asked to imagine the responses of real historical figures to current events. Students research the responses of the characters to events and become aware of the multiple nature of argument, the wide tent of Jewish identity and the myriad approach to ethical issues. All of this contributes to the Jewish identity of the participants and develops their capacity to think Jewishly. Both the cognitive and affect areas of curricula are enjoined as a result of this program.

The challenge to the North American Jewish day school is to find ways to inspire students to think Jewishly. This is not simply a call to more Jewish textuality; it is a call for a meaningful complement of the two canons. Integrating student programs such as RAVSAC's Moot Beit Din and JCAT into the school's curriculum is a powerful means to achieve this goal. The challenges of the university and the workplace can better be met when our students know how to work in havrutas (or groups), perform well when faced with challenges, and most importantly come from a value-laden background. Perhaps this is also not dayyenu, but it is substantive and relevant.

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### First Place Yair Cohen

4th Grade, Yavneh Day School  
Los Gatos, CA

#### MY BROTHER

My big brother, you are very brave.  
You left the family to serve in the army.  
Why, I don't know, but suddenly I miss you.  
It really hurts because I really love you.  
I wrote you a poem because you are so great.  
I'm waiting for a vacation to be with you.  
We'll be together with no fear.  
When will you come to play with me here?  
We wait on Shabbat while you keep people safe.  
When do you return? The food is getting cold!  
I had a dream that suddenly there was peace.  
If we succeed the world will gain.

#### אח שלי בצבא

אח שלי הבכור, אתה ממש גיבור.  
עזבת את המשפחה, ללכת לצבא.  
מדוע, אני לא יודע, אבל פתאום מתגעגע.  
זה ממש כואב, כי אני אותך אוהב.  
כתבתי לך שיר, כי אתה כביר.  
אני מחכה לחופשה, להיות אתך.  
נשחק ביחד, בלי פחד.  
מתי כבר תבוא, לשחק איתי פה?  
אנחנו מחכים בשבת, ואתה שומר על הזולת.  
מתי אתה חוזר? האוכל מתקרר!  
חלמתי חלום, שפתאום יהיה שלום.  
אם נצליח, העולם ירויח!

### Second Place Itai Sharir

3rd Grade, Ronald C. Wornick Jewish Day School  
Foster City, CA

#### THE COLORS WITHIN ME

Sometimes...  
Sometimes I am green and feel like a tree that grew tall.  
The green color can be seen on the beautiful trees and leaves.  
Sometimes I am yellow and feel happy like a sun that can light up the entire world.  
The yellow color can be seen in the illuminating light.  
Sometimes I am orange and feel that my heart is warm like the fire that hits up my body.  
The orange color can be seen in the colors of the fire.  
Sometimes I am black and feel lonely like a bird with no friends.  
The black color can be seen when I lay in the darkness of the night.  
Sometimes.

#### הצבעים שבתוכי

לפעמים...  
לפעמים אני ירק ומרגיש כמו עץ שגדל גבוה.  
רואים את הצבע הירק על העצים והעלים היפים.  
לפעמים אני צהב ומרגיש שמח כמו שמש שיכולה להאיר על כל העולם.  
רואים את הצבע הצהב באור שמאיר.  
לפעמים אני כתם ומרגיש שהלב שלי חם כמו אש שמחממת את הגוף שלי.  
רואים את הכתם בצבעים של האש.  
לפעמים אני שחר ומרגיש לבד כמו צפור בלי חברים.  
רואים את הצבע השחר בחשך בלילה כשאני שוכב במטה.  
לפעמים.

# CONTEST WINNERS



תחרות  
השירה  
העברית

HEBREW  
POETRY  
CONTEST

**Third Place**  
**Maya Segal**

5th Grade, Ronald C. Wornick Jewish Day School  
Foster City, CA

## A NEW FRIEND

Sometimes at night you imagine  
That a horrible monster lives  
comfortably  
Under your bed.  
So, just know that you are correct!

I have a monster under my bed  
And she scares me  
She wakes me up at night,  
And frightens me  
And I can't sleep anymore.

My monster has spiky hair  
A body fat and purple  
And a nose small and round.  
She has horns  
Three eyes and  
Many many teeth.

I am curious to know  
If my monster  
Hears.  
I want to be her friend.  
Maybe she is nice?

Monster, do you have  
A high voice or a low voice?  
Do you like humans?  
I don't want to be scared of you  
Any more.  
Come, give me your  
Hand and you will no longer  
Be alone.

I had a monster under  
My bed  
And she scared me.  
She woke me up in the middle  
Of the night.  
Now I am sleeping.

## חברה חדשה

לפעמים בלילה אתם מדמינים לכם  
שגרה לה בנחת מפלצת אימה  
מתחת למטה שלכם.  
אז תדעו לכם שאתם צודקים!

לי יש מפלצת מתחת למטה  
ואותי היא מפחידה  
היא מעירה אותי בלילה  
ומבהילה  
ואני יותר לא ישנה

למפלצת שלי יש שער דוקרני  
גוף שמן וסגל  
ואף קטן ועגל  
יש לה קרניים  
שלוש עיניים  
והרבה מאד שנים  
מאתים!

מענין אותי לדעת  
אם המפלצת שלי  
שומעת

אני רוצה להיות חברה שלה  
אולי היא בעצם נחמדה?

מפלצת יש לך קול גבוה או נמוך?  
את אוהבת ילדים ואנשים?  
אני לא רוצה יותר לפחד  
בואי תני לי יד  
ואת לא תהי יותר לבד.

לי היתה מפלצת מתחת למטה  
ואותי היא הפחידה  
היא העירה אותי בלילה  
והבהילה  
עכשיו אני ישנה.

## Honorable Mention

**Shira Rom**

5th Grade  
Gideon Hausner Jewish Day School  
Palo Alto, CA

גשם, גשם, עננים

**Mia Schwentarsky**

1st Grade  
Solomon Schechter Day School  
of Las Vegas  
Las Vegas, NV

## RAVSAC Staff Pick

שיר למדינה אהובה

**Uri Shtermer**

4th Grade  
Bialik Hebrew Day School  
Toronto, ON

## ELEMENTARY SCHOOL | NON-NATIVE

**First Place**  
**Irene Meklin**

5th Grade, Contra Costa Jewish Day School  
Lafayette, CA

## BUT LIFE GOES ON

People die,  
People cry,  
But life goes on.

People are murdered,  
People are abandoned,  
But life goes on.

People are punished  
For acts they did not commit,  
But life goes on.

And then life stops.

## אבל החיים נמשכים

אנשים מתים,  
אנשים בוכים,  
אבל החיים נמשכים.

אנשים נרצחים,  
אנשים עוזבים,  
אבל החיים נמשכים.

אנשים נענשים,  
בשביל מעשים שהם לא עושים,  
אבל החיים נמשכים.

ואז החיים נעצרים.

## ELEMENTARY SCHOOL | NON-NATIVE (Continued)

Second Place Elez Bell	5th Grade, Silver Academy Harrisburg, PA	Third Place Ruby Sadikman	5th Grade, Contra Costa Jewish Day School Lafayette, CA
<b>UPSIDE-DOWN</b>	<b>הפוך</b>	<b>WINTER IS COMING</b>	<b>חורף בא</b>
Upside-down, upside-down, everything is upside-down Paradoxes in Africa And in Be'er Sheva During the day and at night everything is upside-down	הפוך הפוך הפוך הפוך פרדוקסים באפריקה ובבאר שבע ביום ובלילה הפוך הפוך השמש רוצה מים הטבע רוצה זיהום הצמחוני רוצה לאכול עוף פעמים העצלן רוצה לקום לרופא יש פצע לרופא שיניים יש סופריה למורה מדע יש ספר חשבון ולחזיר יש סבון העולם משוגע מאוד ואני רוצה לעמוד אבל יש לי משהו עוד וזה לא בנוגע לנרוד אם אתה רוצה להיות בן אדם אתה צריך להיות משוגע עם העולם.	My shoes are covered in leaves, Gray clouds are in the sky. Winter is coming slowly, Winter is coming slowly.  Raindrops fall around me, The wind blows on my face. Winter is coming slowly, Winter is coming slowly.  The bark of the tree is cold and hard, The birds are building their nests. Winter is coming slowly, Winter is coming slowly.  The sun is hiding behind a cloud, The green leaves are not here. Winter is coming slowly, Winter is coming slowly.  The rain left and the snow has arrived, The small animals are hiding in the ground. Winter is here, Winter has come.	הנעלים שלי מכסות ב עלים עננים אפורים בשמים. חורף בא לאט, חורף בא לאט.  טפות של גשם נופלות מסביבי הרוח נושבת לפנים שלי. חורף בא לאט, חורף בא לאט.  השכבים של העץ קשים וקרים, הצפורים בונות את הקנים. חורף בא לאט, חורף בא לאט.  השמש מסתתרת מאחורי ענן, העלים הירוקים לא כאן. חורף בא לאט, חורף בא לאט.  הגשם עזב והשלג בא, החיות הקטנות מתחבאות באדמה. חורף בא לאט, חורף בא לאט.

### Honorable Mention

טיפת המים	ג'ינג'י אוכל	לפעמים אני	קצת חסד	שבת	חיים, שלום, ושקט	בכל איש ואשה
<b>Rebecca Mishell</b> 5th Grade The Brandeis School of San Francisco San Francisco, CA	<b>Rose Ackerman</b> 5th Grade Perelman Jewish Day School Stern Center Wynnewood, PA	<b>Isaac Cheng</b> 5th Grade Akiva School Nashville, TN	<b>Noam Ben Gideon</b> 4th Grade Madison Jewish Community Day School Madison, WI	<b>Lily Zeff</b> 4th Grade Shalom School Sacramento, CA	<b>Barri Seitz</b> 5th Grade The Epstein School Sandy Springs, GA	<b>Edith Kaplan</b> 3rd Grade NE Miles Jewish Day School Birmingham, AL



**First Place**  
**Natalie Brenner**

7th Grade, The Adelson Educational Campus  
Las Vegas, NV

**THE "BOY OF TODAY" AND THE  
"GIRL OF TOMORROW"**

The "Boy of Today" and the "Girl of Tomorrow"  
He wants to play with her  
For her, it is too late.

She is stressed, she does not want to,  
And he only wants to play with her.  
It does not happen, it won't happen  
But what will the "Girl of Tomorrow" do?

He moved to a new place,  
And found a new friend  
And the "Girl of Tomorrow" was left by herself.

**יְלֵד הַיּוֹם וְיִלְדַּת מָחָר**

יְלֵד הַיּוֹם וְיִלְדַּת מָחָר  
הוּא רוֹצֵה לְשַׁחַק אִתָּהּ  
בְּשִׁבְלָהּ יוֹתֵר מִיְּדֵי מָאָחֵר.

הִיא לְחוּצָה, הִיא לֹא רוֹצֵה  
וְהוּא רַק רוֹצֵה לְשַׁחַק אִתָּהּ  
זֶה לֹא קוֹרֶה, זֶה לֹא יִקְרָה  
אָבֵל מָה יִלְדַּת מָחָר תַּעֲשֶׂה?

הוּא עָבַר לְדִירָה חֲדָשָׁה  
וּמֵצָא לוֹ שִׁכְנָה חֲדָשָׁה  
וְיִלְדַּת מָחָר גּוֹתֶרֶה לְבִדָּה.

**Second Place**  
**Adee Franbuch**

6th Grade, Contra Costa Jewish Day School  
Lafayette, CA

**DIFFERENT**

My world is turning  
Everything looks blurred  
Everyone calls me weird  
Hello, my name is Different.

I go to class,  
Wearing what I want  
Everybody laughs and I say,  
"Hello, my name is Different."

A new boy approaches me  
We laugh and become best friends  
He asks me my name  
I say..."Hello, my name is Different."

I am Different,  
He is Different.  
Hello, our name is Different.

**אַחֲרֵת**

הָעוֹלָם שְׁלִי מִסְתּוֹבֵב,  
הַכֹּל נִרְאֶה מְעֻמָּעַם.  
כָּלֵם קוֹרְאִים לִי מוֹזְרָה,  
שְׁלוֹם, קוֹרְאִים לִי אַחֲרֵת.

אֲנִי הוֹלֶכֶת לִכְתָּה,  
לּוֹבֶשֶׁת מָה שְׁאֲנִי רוֹצֵה.  
כָּלֵם צוֹחֲקִים וְאֲנִי אוֹמְרֶת:  
שְׁלוֹם, קוֹרְאִים לִי אַחֲרֵת.

יְלֵד חֲדָשׁ בָּא אֵלַי,  
צָחֲקָנוּ וְהֵיינוּ חֲבֵרִים טוֹבִים.  
הוּא שָׂאֵל אוֹתִי מָה שְׁמִי,  
אֶמְרֶתִי: שְׁלוֹם, קוֹרְאִים לִי אַחֲרֵת.

אֲנִי אַחֲרֵת,  
הוּא אַחֵר,  
שְׁלוֹם, קוֹרְאִים לָנוּ אַחֲרִים.

## MIDDLE SCHOOL | NATIVE (Continued)

<b>Third Place</b> <b>Shira Sobol</b>	6th Grade, Ronald C. Wornick Jewish Day School Foster City, CA
<p><b>A POEM FOR MY MOM</b></p> <p>My name is Shira My mom's name is Hadas I am an only child Period. My mom and I have a big and strong love like the sun. Sometimes we argue, But at the end of the day we are friends again. When I am with my mom a smile comes on my face And in my heart there's a rainbow and clouds. When I am sad, my mom hugs me tight, And I am not alone anymore. My mom and I together are happy, My mom's smile is the light of the day, She sends me love and warmth. Her eyes are beautiful. When she looks at me She won't go anywhere without me, I wish! My mom.</p>	
<p><b>שיר לאמא</b></p> <p>קוראים לי שירה. לאמא שלי קוראים הדס. אני בת יחידה. נקודה. לאמא ולי יש אהבה חזקה וגדולה כמו השמש. לפעמים אנחנו רבות, אבל בסוף היום אנחנו שוב חברות. על הפנים כשאני עם אמא עולה לי חיוך ולי בלב יש קשת ועננים. כשאני עצובה אמא אותי מחבקת חזק, ויותר אני לא לבד. אמא ואני ביחד שמחות ומאשרות! החיוך של אמא הוא אור היום היא שולחת לי אהבה וחום. העינים שלה יפיפיות. כשהיא מביטה אלי היא לא תלך לשום מקום בלעדי, הלוואי! אמא שלי.</p>	

### Honorable Mention

מה היא ראתה?

**Yuval Shencher**

8th Grade  
Adelson Educational Campus  
Las Vegas, NV

שיר החיים

**Ron Gvishi**

7th Grade  
Tehiyah Day School  
El Cerrito, CA

ארץ הפלאות

**Tal Saadia**

8th Grade  
Gesher Jewish Day School  
Fairfax, VA

### RAVSAK Staff Picks

שיר

**Sapir Levi**

8th Grade  
Abraham Joshua Heschel  
Day School  
Northridge, CA

ספרים

**Ellior Rose**

6th Grade  
Saul Mirowitz Jewish  
Community School  
Creve Coeur, MO

## MIDDLE SCHOOL | NON-NATIVE

<b>First Place</b> <b>Jacob Ellenbogen</b>	8th Grade, Hillel Day School of Metropolitan Detroit Farmington Hills, MI
<p><b>NOT JUST A TYPICAL CHILD</b></p> <p>I am not just a typical child Who studies together with others. I am not just a typical child Whose thoughts are the same as another's. I am not just a typical child Who does not always speak honestly. I am not just a typical child Who converses about only "me." I am not just a typical child Of whom "I" is the start and the end. I am not just a typical child Who knows not how to be a true friend. I am not just a typical child I am a different child.</p>	
<p><b>לא רק עוד ילד</b></p> <p>אני לא רק עוד ילד שלומד עם כל האחרים. אני לא רק עוד ילד שחושב כמו כל הילדים. אני לא רק עוד ילד שלא אומר את האמת. אני לא רק עוד ילד שמדבר רק על עצמי. אני לא רק עוד ילד שתמיד צועק "אני" "אני". אני לא רק עוד ילד שלא יודע להיות חבר. אני לא רק עוד ילד אני ילד אחר.</p>	

### Honorable Mention

אני רוצה שלום

**Nathan Flood**

7th Grade  
Adelson Educational Campus  
Las Vegas, NV

יום אחד

**Gabriella Vulakh**

8th Grade  
The Brandeis School of San Francisco  
San Francisco, CA

### RAVSAK Staff Picks

הכדורסל שלי

**Ezra Ament**

8th Grade  
Carmel Academy  
Greenwich, CT

מה הוא בית

**Arielle Bertman**

7th Grade  
Yavneh Day School  
Los Gatos, CA

**Second Place**  
**Dahlia Matanky**

7th Grade,  
Chicago Jewish Day School  
Chicago, IL

כָּל כֶּךָ נִיסִיתִי  
נִיסִיתִי כָּל כֶּךָ  
לִהְיוֹת מִיִּשְׁהוּ אַחֵר  
זֶה לֹא אֲנִי  
נִיסִיתִי לִהְיוֹת  
בֵּת מוֹשְׁלֶמֶת  
חֲבֵרָה מוֹשְׁלֶמֶת  
אָבֵל אֵיךְ?  
עָשִׂיתִי אֵת זֶה  
וְעָשִׂיתִי אֵת זֶה  
אָבֵל בְּסוּפוֹ שֶׁל דָּבָר  
לֹא יְכוּלֹתִי!

**I TRIED SO HARD**

I tried so hard  
To be somebody else  
But it's not me  
I tried to be  
A perfect daughter  
A perfect friend  
But how?  
I tried this  
I tried that  
But eventually I just  
Couldn't do it anymore!

פרח בלי עלי כותרת

**Rebecca Raush**

8th Grade  
Kellman Brown Academy  
Voorhees Township, NJ

החגים שלי

**Joshua Cohen**

8th Grade  
Beth Tfiloh Dahan Community School  
Pikesville, MD

**Third Place**  
**Darren Rosing**

7th Grade, The Davis Academy  
Atlanta, GA

**BUT, ONE DAY...**

Today, the world is not completely wonderful.  
There are many people filled with happiness, but also many people full of sadness.  
There is not peace in Israel, instead a dangerous war.  
The world is not perfect.  
  
There are little boys and girls in Africa who are not receiving an education.  
There are children and their parents without food to eat.  
Today, pollution is prominent in China.  
Today, there are people with cancer longing for a cure that does not exist.  
Today, there are many problems in the world.  
  
But, one day...  
  
But, one day, the world will be a place of perfection.  
But, one day, there will be a wonderful absence of problems.  
On that day, we will find a cure for cancer.  
On that day, all countries will shake hands with other countries.  
One day, there will be peace everywhere, no war.

However, that day will not come as a gift.  
We must work hard to make the world truly magnificent.  
Give love to your neighbor of peace,  
And participate in acts of lovingkindness always,  
And maybe, just maybe, that day will come sooner.  
Maybe, one day...

**אָבֵל יוֹם אֶחָד...**

הַיּוֹם, הָעוֹלָם מִמָּשׁ לֹא כָל-כֶּךָ מְצוּיָין.  
יֵשׁ הֶרֶבָּה אֲנָשִׁים שְׂמִיחִים, אָבֵל יֵשׁ גַּם אֲנָשִׁים עֲצוּבִים.  
אֵין שְׁלוֹם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל, יֵשׁ מִלְחָמָה מְסוּכָּנָה,  
הָעוֹלָם לֹא מוֹשְׁלָם.  
יֵשׁ תַּלְמִידִים וְתַלְמִידוֹת בְּאַפְרִיקָה בְּלִי חִינוּךְ,  
יֵשׁ יְלָדִים וְהוֹרִים בְּלִי אוֹכֵל לֶאֱכוֹל.  
הַיּוֹם, יֵשׁ זִיהוּם בְּסִין.  
הַיּוֹם, יֵשׁ אֲנָשִׁים עִם סֶרְטֵן וּבְלִי רְפוּאָה.  
הַיּוֹם, יֵשׁ הֶרֶבָּה בְּעִיּוֹת בְּעוֹלָם.  
אָבֵל יוֹם אֶחָד...  
אָבֵל יוֹם אֶחָד, הָעוֹלָם יִהְיֶה מְקוֹם בְּאֵמֶת מוֹשְׁלָם.  
אָבֵל יוֹם אֶחָד, לֹא יִהְיֶה בְּעִיּוֹת בְּעוֹלָם.  
בַּיּוֹם הַזֶּה, אֲנַחְנוּ נִמְצָא רְפוּאָה לְסֶרְטֵן וְלֹא נָמוּת.  
בַּיּוֹם הַזֶּה, כָּל הַמְּדִינּוֹת יִחְזִיקוּ יָדַיִם עִם עוֹד מְדִינּוֹת.  
יוֹם אֶחָד, יִהְיֶה שְׁלוֹם בְּכָל הָעוֹלָם וְלֹא מִלְחָמָה.  
אָבֵל יוֹם אֶחָד הַזֶּה לֹא יִבּוֹא כְּמִתְנָה.  
אֲנַחְנוּ צָרִיכִים לַעֲבֹד קָשָׁה לְעוֹלָם יוֹתֵר טוֹב.  
לִתֵּת אֲהָבָה, לְהִשְׁפִּין שְׁלוֹם,  
וְלַעֲשׂוֹת גְּמִילוּת חֲסִדִּים כָּל הַזְּמָן,  
וְאוֹלֵי הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יִגִּיעַ מֵהֵר...  
אוֹלֵי יוֹם אֶחָד...



## HIGH SCHOOL | NATIVE

<b>First Place</b> Jael Azani	10th Grade, The Weber School Atlanta, GA
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### BARE FEET

Bare feet

Calloused—not from work

But from life.

From pacing in the desert,

From reflecting on the beach,

From exploring fields.

Bare feet that have skipped around and  
danced

On a cloud suspended from the sky

Or stepped into the darkest abys

Without any care.

It does not matter when or where,

They are always exposed, there, bare.

### רגלים יחפות

רגלים יחפות

מיבלות לא מעבודה.

מחיים.

מצעדים במדבר

מהרהור על החוף

מסריקת השדות.

רגלים יחפות שקפצו ורקדו

על ענן מרחף בשמים

או שקעו במעמקים הכי אפלים

ללא פקוח.

זה לא משנה מתי או איפה,

הן תמיד חשופות.

### Third Place Roey Mevorach

10th Grade, de Toledo High School  
West Hills, CA

### החגים של החורף

האוויר מתקרר והרוח נושבת.

האדמה ממש מצטננת.

העננים כבר בוכים

והעצים מתקלחים.

זה לא בגלל שהם עצובים,

זה בגלל שהם מתרגשים לקראת החגים.

הם מחכים לאור

ושמחים לדרור.

הם אוהבים צבעים,

מאירים ונעימים.

בזמן הזה קורים נסים,

כמו לפני הרבה הרבה שנים.

תשעה נרות

והרבה חגניות,

מפיצים הרבה אור

ומחממים את הקר.

<b>Second Place</b> Ben Elazar and William Schertzer	11th Grade, David Posnack Jewish Day School Davie, FL
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### REALITY

The adults hope for a resolution

The children pray for security

The infants don't know.

The soldiers are fighting

A war that never ends

The allies won't help

And our citizens live in fear!

### מציאות

המבוגרים מקווים, שהסתיים

הילדים מתפללים, לבטיחות

והתינוקות לא יודעים.

החיילים נלחמים

מלחמה לא נפסקת.

בני הבית לא עוזרים,

אזרחינו פוחדים!

### THE HOLIDAYS OF THE WINTER

The air is getting colder and there is a breeze

The ground is stiffening

The clouds are crying

And the trees are showering.

It is not because they are sad

But because they are excited for the holidays

They are waiting for the light

And happy for the freedom.

They love the colors

Pleasant and comforting

During this time miracles happen

Just like many many years ago.

Nine candles

And plenty of menorahs

Flooding the room with light

And warming the cold.

### Honorable Mention

כשיבוא היום

המסע

Noam Haykeen

10th Grade  
de Toledo High School  
West Hills, CA

Itai Darmon

9th Grade  
Milken Community Schools  
Los Angeles, CA

<b>First Place</b> <b>Eden Gilan</b>	10th Grade, Frankel Jewish Academy West Bloomfield, MI	<b>Second Place</b> <b>Aaron Saliman</b>	10th Grade, Milken Community Schools Los Angeles, CA
<p><b>אורות יום שישי</b></p> <p>אלוקי ברוך אתה ה' שמר נא על הילדים שלך אלוקינו מלך העולם שאנחנו נהיה בטוחים, שמחים, ובריאים אשר קדשנו במצוותיו ויהיה שלום בארץ שנשבעת וציונו להדליק נר עד ערב ששי הבא של שבת אמן</p> <p><b>FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS</b></p> <p>My God Blessed is He Please watch over your children God, the king of the world That we will be safe, happy, and healthy Who makes us holy with His Commandments And there will be peace in the Land that You promised And He commanded us to light a candle Until next Friday night For Shabbat Amen</p>		<p><b>A POEM ABOUT TRAVEL</b></p> <p>It is said that a grand journey begins with a single step But for me, this is not so My journey begins with a single word Large or small That after a moment, becomes a sentence</p> <p>My journey takes time And I do not move quickly There are weeks without movement When I wander without knowing to where And perhaps I seek another road And abandon the one I live</p> <p>But after such times Without movement or words An idea will be illuminated</p> <p>I don't have to know The destination or the end I just need to see the path before me For a meter Or two</p> <p>And after a year Or two After work That exhausts I no longer have just a word I have more than a sentence</p> <p>I walk This long journey of mine with Paper A pencil Words And ideas</p>	
		<p><b>שיר של טיולים</b></p> <p>אומרים שמסע גדול מתחיל עם צעד אחד אבל מנסיוני זה שגוי המסע שלי מתחיל עם מילה אחת קטנה או גדולה זה לא אכפת לי ואחרי דקה המילה מתחלפת למשפט</p> <p>המסע שלי לוקח זמן ואני לא הולך מהר יש שבועות בלי תזונה ואני נודד בלי לדעת לאן אולי אני מחפש דרך אחרת ומזניח את שביל חיי</p> <p>אבל אחרי זמנים כאלה בלי תזונה או מילה אולי יאיר לי רעיון</p> <p>אני לא צריך לדעת את היעד או הסוף אני רק צריך לראות את הדרך לפני</p> <p>מטר אחד או שניים</p> <p>אחרי שנה אחת או שתיים אחרי עבודה קשה ומייגעת אין לי רק מילה אחת יש לי יותר ממשפט</p> <p>אני הולך במסע הארוך שלי עם נייר עפרון מילים ורעיונות</p>	

## HIGH SCHOOL NON-NATIVE (Continued)

### Third Place Drew Tarnopol

10th Grade, Frankel Jewish Academy  
West Bloomfield, MI

#### EVERYTHING LOOKS BEAUTIFUL BEFORE

The leaves hang on the trees,  
Waiting for something unknown to the eyes.  
They change to gold and amber,  
Sunrise and sunset.  
But the winter comes,  
And the leaves drop to the cold ground.

The flowers grow on the ground,  
They live inside themselves.  
They open to the light,  
A flower for every color.  
But the petals leave and glide in the wind,  
And the flower withers to nothing.

The eagle flies in the sky,  
Living in a different world.  
He is above all,  
And people stare to the sky to see his shadow.  
But even birds lose their feathers,  
And the eagle will die in a foreign place.

Everything looks beautiful before the end  
It is hard to think of the end during a good time  
It is hard to forget the good time in the end  
Everything looks beautiful before the end.

#### הכל נראה יפה לפני

העלים תלויים על העצים  
מחכים למשהו נעלם מהעיניים  
הם משתנים לזהב וענבר  
הג'וז ושקיעת החמה  
אבל החרף בא  
והעלים נושרים לאדמה הקרה  
הפרחים גדלים על אדמה  
חיים בתוך עצמם  
הם פתוחים לאור  
פרח לכל צבע  
אבל עלי הכותרת יוצאים ומרחפים  
ברוח  
והפרח קמל לכלום  
הנשר טס בשמים  
חי בעולם אחר  
הוא מעל הכל  
ואנשים מביטים לשמים לראות את צלו  
אבל גם צפרים יאבדו נוצותיהם  
והנשר ימות במקום זר  
הכל נראה יפה לפני הסוף  
קשה לחשב על סוף בזמן טוב  
קשה לשכח הזמן הטוב בסוף  
הכל נראה יפה לפני הסוף.

#### Honorable Mention

קוביות

#### Karin Videlefsky

12th Grade  
The Weber School  
Atlanta, GA

התלמידה השקטה

#### Sasha Manus

11th Grade  
Jewish Community High  
School of the Bay  
San Francisco, CA

#### RAVSAC Staff Pick

עבדתי

#### Matthew Ost

11th Grade  
Charles E. Smith Jewish Day  
School  
Rockville, MD



**Teacher Award-First Place**  
**Iris Cohen**

de Toledo High School  
West Hills, CA

**ARE YOU SPEAKING THE  
LANGUAGE OF YOUR MOTHER?**

Who are your “roots”?  
From whose well did you drink your  
entire life  
Until you grew up to be the person you  
are?  
What kind of person are you?  
To where do you belong?  
Do you belong here?  
Do you belong there?

“I’m often here and barely there  
I ask questions,  
I’m a global researcher,  
Willing to experience  
Devoted to the familiar  
Dependant on my past.”

What is of more importance to you?  
What is your truth?  
Do you speak the language of your  
mother?  
Are you understood?  
What is freedom in your eyes?  
Who directs you?  
To whom are you devoted?  
Imprisoned by false beliefs  
Passion  
Generation  
A trickling  
The human being is a reflection of his  
culture  
Dialogue...

**הָאֵם אֶת מְדַבֶּרֶת בְּשִׁפְת  
אִמָּךְ?**

מִי הַשּׁוֹרְשִׁים שְׁלָךְ?  
מִבָּאֵר שֶׁל מִי שְׁתִּיתָ כָּל חַיֶּיךָ  
עַד שֶׁצִּמַּחְתָּ לְהִיּוֹת הָאָדָם שָׂאָתָ?  
וְאִיזָה מִיָּן אָדָם אָתָּ?  
לָאֵן אֶת שִׁיכְתָּ?  
הָאֵם לְכָאֵן?  
הָאֵם לְשָׁם?

”אֲנִי, הֶרְבֵּה כָּאֵן וְקִצַּת שָׁם  
שׂוֹאֵלֶת שְׁאֵלוֹת  
חוֹקֶרֶת עוֹלָמוֹת  
מְתַנַּסֶּה  
מְתַמַּסֶּרֶת לְמוֹכֵר  
נִשְׁעָנֶת עַל הָעֵבֶר,”

מָה חֲשׁוֹב לָךְ יוֹתֵר?  
מָה הָאֲמִת שְׁלָךְ?  
הָאֵם אֶת מְדַבֶּרֶת בְּשִׁפְת אִמָּךְ?  
הָאֵם מְבִינִים אוֹתָךְ?  
מִהוּ חֶפֶשׁ בְּעֵינֶיךָ?  
מִי מְכֻוֵּן אוֹתָךְ?  
לְמִי אֶת מְתַמַּסֶּרֶת?  
שְׂבוּיָה בְּאֲמוֹנוֹת שְׂגוּיוֹת  
הַמִּית הַלֵּב  
דּוֹר  
חֲלָחוֹל  
הָאָדָם כֵּלֹּי הוּא תְּבִנִית נוֹף  
תְּרַבּוּתוֹ  
דִּיאָלוֹג...

**MEET THE JUDGES**



**Maya Arad** grew up in Kibbutz Nahal Oz in Israel. She earned her PhD in linguistics at University College in London and now lives in California, where she is writer in residence at the Taube

Center for Jewish Studies at Stanford University. Author of nine books in various genres, she is recognized as one of the leading Hebrew novelists of her generation.



**Sara Hascal** has been a senior lecturer in Hebrew in the Department of Near Eastern and Judaic studies at Brandeis University since 1984. She received an MA in education from Lesley College and a MA in

Judaic studies from Hebrew College. She is a co-author of the *Brandeis Modern Hebrew* textbook. Sara Hascal is also the assistant director of the School of Hebrew at Middlebury College.



**Giddon Ticotsky** is a visiting lecturer at Stanford University's department of comparative literature. He completed undergraduate studies at Tel Aviv University's departments

of Hebrew literature and French language and literature, and graduated from the Hebrew University's department of Hebrew literature. He recently won the Israeli Bahat Prize for the best original scholarly book manuscript in Hebrew, for his forthcoming book about the work of the Israeli poetess Dalia Ravikovitch (1936-2005), one of the most prominent figures in Modern Hebrew literature.



IDANA GOLDBERG

# LITERACY

## THE GIFT OF MANY THINGS

A series of television commercials from my youth encouraged viewers who were illiterate to seek help and learn to read. Illiteracy, these ads declared, was a stumbling block, impeding good people from transcending the poverty of their circumstances, but it was not irrevocable.

Steven Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner, authors of *Freakonomics*, ask which of the following is more predictive of higher student test scores, which can proxy for higher literacy: parents reading to their children nightly or the number of books in a child's home. Surprisingly, parental behavior is less influential than ambient décor. The authors acknowledge that correlation is not causation, and that books are indicators of literacy, not necessarily the cause. The finding is nevertheless instructive.

If illiteracy correlates to poverty and missed opportunities, so too does the lack of Jewish literacy. Without a deep knowledge of Jewish texts and traditions, in the absence of the ability to read and understand the Hebrew language, students lack the ability to create Jewish meaning and fully own their Jewish lives. These students are culturally impoverished, with Jewish illiteracy a stumbling block that impedes further Jewish growth.

The finding that literacy correlates with the number of books in a home calls to mind the stereotypical Jewish home with books covering every surface (at the very least, true in my own home). The book *The Chosen Few* by Botticini and Eckstein details the ways that Jewish society was shaped over the centuries by the drive to inculcate Jewish literacy. But, like the *Freakonomics* finding, what is the cause and what is the effect? Do these levels of literacy result from being surrounded by books, or are Jews surrounded by books because they are evidence of Jewish literacy? I will leave it to the social scientists to continue to parse that question, but an important take-away is the extent to which Jewish literacy provided a mechanism for the transmission of Jewish culture and religion, assuring the continuation of Judaism and the Jewish people.

In Pirkei Avot (6:1), Rabbi Meir says, "Anyone who involves himself in Torah lishmah (for its own sake) merits many things, and more-over the entire world is worthwhile for his sake." The Mishnah and the commentaries attempt to elucidate "the many things" and to understand why learning Torah makes the world worthwhile. This concept of Torah lishmah mirrors the ideal notion of Jewish literacy that we are trying to inculcate in students. Jewish literacy is similarly

valuable for its own sake; the possessor uses it as a lens that merits "many things" as it provides perspectives hitherto unknown, and clarity and inspiration as to what gives life purpose.

But the sages were not satisfied that Rabbi Meir's Torah lishmah is sufficient. In a well-known debate in Kiddushin 40b, Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Akiva argue over whether study or action is superior. Rabbi Tarfon claims action and Rabbi Akiva, study. At which point the sages chime in to support Rabbi Akiva's position by noting that study leads to action. In effect, study for its own sake is laudatory, but the expectation remains that increased study will lead to an increase in the performance of commandments and other Jewish behaviors.

While there is no consensus on what being Jewishly literate means or includes (just read the diverse perspectives contained in this exceptional issue of *HaYidion*), we do know that Jewish day schools best provide that same mechanism that allowed for Jewish continuity over the ages and the Torah lishmah that is valuable for its own sake and as the impetus for increased Jewish behavior. Jewish day schools surround children with *Freakonomics'* proverbial books, both the written texts and the textpeople, as Abraham J. Heschel called the ideal Jewish teachers. Day school students live with texts, engage with texts and understand how texts create meaning that becomes action.

At RAVSAK we've always had a special focus on the Jewish mission of our schools. Our own mission statement declares that we support the Jewish life, learning and leadership of our schools, with the understanding that the adjective Jewish modifies each word in the phrase. Every program we've created has its roots in our deep belief in both the value and necessity of Jewish literacy. New heads of schools with little prior Jewish knowledge and experience? Sulam added the Jewish component to their already highly successful resumes. School boards seeking to build leadership pipelines? Sulam 2.0 ensured that Judaism informed the curriculum and addressed challenges to the Jewish mission. From student programs to conferences, new approaches to curriculum development, *HaYidion* and our website, RAVSAK's commitments are to us the expression of Jewish literacy and we hope the inspiration for it as well. We've always said that our client is the Jewish future. Jewish day schools that provide the enveloping environment in which Torah lishmah becomes the kind of Jewish literacy that leads to action, are those that will deliver that future.

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Chaim Heller, Head of School  
San Diego Jewish Academy



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**Together we can reflect on the work of RAVSAK and look forward to the next step of our journey in supporting Jewish day schools.**

## **Share thanks, tributes, & testimonials in the final RAVSAK-produced H A Y I D I O N.**

The final RAVSAK-produced issue of HaYidion will feature a retrospective of RAVSAK's work and impact. An important part of this reflection is hearing from you, our partners in this holy endeavor. We are inviting you to share thanks, tributes, and testimonials to be featured in a special section of the publication.

**Deadline for all tribute submissions is March 31, 2016.**

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**Please visit our website to submit a tribute: [ravsak.org/tribute](http://ravsak.org/tribute).**