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What If? Teaching Young Children Skills for Their Whole Lives

When we plant a tree, we don't expect to wake up the next morning, or even the next week, month or year, and see a strong trunk, with high branches, beautiful leaves and delicious fruit. When we plant a tree, we are counting on time and optimal conditions to grow and nurture it, so that it can bear fruit for generations to come. We just need to be patient.



So too with our youngest learners. Teachers often refer to the teaching time they have in the classroom as time to prepare the children in their care for the following grade. They see time in terms of periods, classes, semesters and school years. As an early childhood educator, I'd like to propose an alternative. The teaching that we do is not preparing the children for the following grade, but rather for a promising and fulfilling educational future. If we are able to step back and take a broader view, we can change the way we think about education and become passionate, master educators who are setting up our youngest learners, not for tomorrow, but for life.

The most essential principle in early childhood education is a full and deep understanding of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP). According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), DAP is a framework designed to promote young children's optimal learning and development. To make decisions that reflect best practices, educators take into consideration what they know about child development and learning, each child as an individual, and each child's social and cultural context.



The knowledge of these three components are critical when planning not only curriculum for young children, but for creating an optimal environment in which effective learning can take place. If we don't understand child development and what typical children should be expected to do at each age, and we don't take the time to really get to know our students as individuals, including where they come from culturally, we cannot expect to plan appropriately for them. The knowledge and application of DAP by our teachers is essential to the success of our children. By contrast, requiring pre-schoolers to sit behind desks and complete rote workbooks and worksheets shows a complete lack of understanding or application of DAP.

Why is it then that skilled and trained educators succumb to external pressure to push skills down earlier and earlier, expecting children to master concepts that they are not yet developmentally ready to learn? What if every educator remembered their training and put the children first and gave them the time they needed to grow and mature in developmentally appropriate ways? What if the disregard for DAP is related to the unprecedented rise in mental health issues such as anxiety, depression and even suicide among young people?

Children are being diagnosed, or misdiagnosed, with ADHD, behavior issues and learning disabilities at an alarming rate and at earlier ages. What if we remembered that children are just that, children? What if we could solve some of these frightening mental health trends by giving our youngest learners the gift of time and letting preschoolers and kindergartners do what

they are supposed to do and learn how they learn best—through play and meaningful, hands-on experiences, not through workbooks, worksheets and inappropriate expectations?

It is a dream of mine to spend less time speaking with parents about teaching reading and writing, memorizing facts and figures, and making sure that children are “prepared” for first grade. I wish I could hear fewer parents asking when their children are going to read and more parents asking how their early childhood experience is going to lay the foundation for their success in school, their social and emotional well-being, and their mastery of the skills needed to become a future leader of our world.

Parents should be asking if their child shared, compromised, solved a problem, brainstormed, collaborated, created, experimented, investigated, designed, built, communicated, wondered, questioned, explored, sang, danced, imagined, dreamed, not if they memorized. So many essential skills and brain connections are made through meaningful interactions with a purposeful, intentional, child-centered environment filled with rich opportunities to be exposed to a myriad of multisensory experiences. The early childhood years are exactly the time when the young brain is ready to absorb everything it needs for a bright, promising and joyful tomorrow—but only if it is done right.

What if we were truly in the “business” of education for the long-term outcome, not to see the product of our hard work here and now, but actually investing in the future of our youngest learners? What if lighting

that spark in each child to pursue his or her passions, to explore, to create, to question, to think, to make connections, wasn't for now, but was for 20-plus years from now? What if the seeds that we are planting today in creating self-confident, enthusiastic learners could be actually quantified in high school, college and beyond?

Let's stop with the preschool assessments and the pressure to meet academic goals earlier. Rather, let's create an optimum environment in which our children can learn, grow and thrive. Let's not prepare our children for the following grade and pass them along to the next teacher. Let's change the paradigm of education to create classrooms and schools that capitalize on the time that they have to optimize our learning environments and truly lay the foundation for lifelong, successful lovers of learning.

Let's teach our children to question anything and everything, to make connections, to experiment, to always see the hand of Hashem, to love Torah, to always show gratitude, to love themselves and to love school. Let's build their self-confidence, their self-esteem, their self-image and their self-awareness. Let's nourish their minds, bodies and souls. Let's nurture our children's sense of wonder and excitement. The early childhood years are truly a magical time. Let's start at the very beginning, and let's do this right.

Every child will learn to read and write. They'll be able to do that and much, much more. They may even have the confidence and the skills to change the world.

After all, all they ever really needed to know, they learned in kindergarten.

NINA BRUDER
AND FAYGE SAFRAN NOVOGRODER

Time Out Puts Learning In

Given the amount of student learning that must happen during a school year, you might think that every minute of a teacher's time is best spent tending to the immediate needs of students and that every minute of an administrator's time is best spent tending to the immediate needs of teachers, parents, students and boards.

In a crisis time such as this, this is certainly the case. Under normal school circumstances, however, not so. Our experience at Jewish New Teacher Project (JNTP), supporting new teachers and early-career administrators in over 170 Jewish day schools across North America, has found that both teacher and administrator time away from immediate, daily demands to focus on teacher growth yields long-lasting and far-reaching results for teachers, students and schools as a whole. Such results include reduced burnout, increased teacher retention, fostering of creativity and collaboration, heightened sense of professionalism, improved quality of education, improved student learning, and consistency across grades and curriculum. Based on both quantitative research and anecdotal observations, there is clear evidence that time dedicated to professional learning and growth is time well spent strengthening schools.

DEFINING TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Many types of professional learning support the growth of teachers: structured professional development workshops, where experts (internal or external) teach staff about the latest research in education or how to use a specific technique or ed tech, followed by implementation coaching; formal peer mentoring; instructional



coaching; and classroom observations and feedback. Staff and departmental meetings can be used for professional learning and growth. For example, at SAR High School in New York City, each year a different topic, such as assessment or student workload and stress, is chosen, and learning around that topic is incorporated into all meetings. At Schechter Manhattan, weekly all-faculty, afterschool meetings are designed for teachers to pursue inquiry and growth related to schoolwide educational priorities. Teachers choose to participate with a cohort of peers in one of three professional development areas; each group sets goals and an agenda for itself and meets throughout the year.

One of the most impactful, ongoing sources of teacher growth is feedback from administrators following classroom observations. Consistent formative feedback communicates administrators' belief that teachers want to grow, that an administrator

supports that growth and wants teachers to succeed, and that it is a fundamental value of the school that professionals continue to grow throughout their careers. Feedback based on data collected during classroom observations helps teachers "see" their teaching from an objective, evidence-based perspective.

QUANTITATIVE EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

Major research on the impact of teacher professional learning on students, teachers and schools comes from the public school realm; as far as we know, no large-scale formal studies have been conducted across Jewish day schools. We believe that the public school research findings are relevant and applicable to the Jewish day school world.

One of the seminal studies on the positive impact of professional development was

conducted by the US Department of Education (*Reviewing the Evidence on How Teacher Professional Development Affects Student Achievement, 2007*). This report reviewed nine studies on the topic and found that teachers who received quality professional development of at least 49 hours per year (approx 1.3 hrs / week) positively impacted student achievement by 21 percentile points. Interestingly, this report also found that a small amount of professional development (5-14 hours total) showed no statistically significant effects on student achievement.

More recently, an article in the *Journal of Professional Capital and Community* reviewed 30 studies on the relationship between years of teaching experience and teachers' impact on student learning (*Does Teaching Experience Increase Teacher Effectiveness? A Review of U.S. Research, October 21, 2019*). The findings suggest that "investments in building an experienced, highly-collaborative teacher workforce focused on continual learning are most likely to result in greater student learning, while, at the same time, reducing teacher attrition."

This past fall, New Teacher Center (NTC), JNTP's parent organization, released a study (*Counting the Cost: A Commitment to Educational Equity that Yields Results, October 2019*) on the return on investment of spending resources on NTC's intensive new teacher mentoring program. Findings include:

Increased student learning: Students in grades 4-8 who had NTC-supported teachers showed up to five months of additional learning in math and English than those who did not have NTC-supported teachers.

Increased teacher retention: Teacher retention was 11 percentage points higher in the group supported by NTC than those in a control group (78% vs. 67%).

Districts cost savings: NTC's professional learning program for new teachers yielded a 22% financial return to a district because of increased teacher retention. Based on a five-year investment, this is equivalent to a district saving nearly \$1M.

These research findings point to a clear learning, as well as financial, return on investment in teacher professional development.

On a smaller scale, JNTP's own yearly participant survey results similarly point to significant improvements in classroom

teaching and student learning. JNTP's latest data show that 98% of participating new teachers believe having a JNTP mentor improves their teaching practice; 100% of administrators and 98% of new teachers report that a new teacher's work with their JNTP mentor improves student learning.



ANECDOTAL EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

In working with many schools that provide significant opportunities for professional learning and growth to their staff, we have observed the following positive results.

Professional development allows adults to model valuable habits for their students.

When the adults in a school building are obviously engaged in their own learning, and especially collaborative learning, those behaviors and values trickle down to students. The modeling of lifelong learning and collaboration is a valuable contributor to student success, both while they are in school and in years following.

Administrators who regularly visit classrooms provide leadership and are better informed.

There are numerous benefits when administrators make the time to regularly visit classrooms and provide feedback to teachers. Certainly, observation and direct feedback helps improve teachers' classroom practice; additionally, they provide an opportunity for administrators to reinforce school values and educational priorities. Being in classrooms regularly yields data that can help inform what type of professional development the staff needs and can help an administrator identify potential staffing problems as well as gaps that need to be filled. Knowledge gained from data collected during observations can also be very useful in conversations with parents about their children. And classroom observation provides opportunities for administrators to spend more time on leadership activities such as aligning people and curriculum across classrooms,

motivating and inspiring, which is what leads to dramatic and useful change in a school.

Classroom visits don't need to be time-intensive. In JNTP's Administrator Support Program, early-career administrators learn the skill of frequent, unannounced "quick visits." Administrators can build into their schedules consistent 10-minute classroom visits to ensure ongoing observation and feedback of their staff. One school implemented this method, tasking each administrator to visit six classrooms every week. The result has been a marked increase in communication between teachers and administrators.

Schools are seen as desirable places of employment.

When schools support teachers and provide opportunities for growth, word gets out. The best educators want to work at such a school. One school reports a rise in the caliber of teachers applying for jobs there because it has become known as a school that supports teachers. When schools are experienced as supportive working environments, teachers join and want to stay.

School culture is improved.

Ongoing teacher learning opportunities positively impact school culture. When a school becomes a place where new ideas are elicited and value is placed on reflection and formative assessment (as opposed to only evaluation), the school culture shifts toward creative thinking and collaboration, which in turn breeds communication, relationships and trust throughout the school community. As one administrator recently told us, being part of a collaborative culture means teachers don't feel isolated. In addition, when teachers are asked to lead professional development meetings or provide peer observation and feedback, there are opportunities for the administration to acknowledge success, convey deserved status and increase morale. A school culture that embodies the qualities of ongoing growth and collaboration becomes an exciting place for teaching and learning.

SO, HOW CAN SCHOOLS MAKE TIME?

It's clear from research and anecdotal evidence that investing precious time in teacher professional learning and growth can elevate teaching, learning and school culture. But, practically, how can schools make the time in their schedules and in their budgets?



Make it a value and set expectations.

It all starts with school values. If professional growth is a value, then resource allocation should reflect that. Finding time in the schedule and money in the budget needs to be a priority, whether it's for intensive mentoring, consistent observations and feedback, in-service workshops, staff meetings or any other type of professional learning.

Once time is allocated, administrators must share the expectation for professional learning with their staff. A shared calendar for meetings, training days, observation and feedback, mentoring and all other learning opportunities helps everyone be on the same page. It's also important to have a conversation about expectations around professional growth with new hires as part of their interview and onboarding process. Scheck Hillel Community School in Miami, for example, makes it clear that attendance at weekly afterschool professional development meetings is mandatory as part of a full-time contract. The schedule of learning for those meetings is built in advance during the summer.

Think creatively.

Thinking out-of-the-box can elicit many creative ideas for finding time for professional learning and growth. For example: Make use of national holidays like Veterans Day or Election Day for full-day learning. Offer free babysitting for staff's younger children run by older students (they can use chesed hours or be paid minimally), like they do at Fuchs Mizrahi School in Cleveland. Serve dinner once a month (or, save money and have teachers bring their own dinner) and have a full-staff meeting with a focus on professional learning. Choose five times a year when students are let out early for teacher professional development. Have teachers use one planning period every other week to observe another teacher's classroom.

At one school, teachers participate in instructional rounds, where they visit classrooms of colleagues in an organized and coordinated effort to better understand teaching and learning. This is made possible by the fact that every class has two teachers; when one teacher leaves on rounds, the other one leads instruction.

Distribute leadership in order to find time.

Just as administrators look for sources of money for their financial budget, they need to look for sources of time for their time budget. Administrators can consider who on their staff can take over particular time-intensive tasks—for example, running professional development or planning and leading staff meetings. Administrators can empower their department chairs, grade leaders or curriculum coordinators to observe classrooms and collect data in their place. Besides freeing up some of the administrator's time in order to support their teachers' professional growth, distributing leadership provides fantastic opportunities to tap veteran teachers to take on informal or non-administrative leadership roles. This has the added benefit of boosting morale and providing necessary stimulation to keep the best teachers

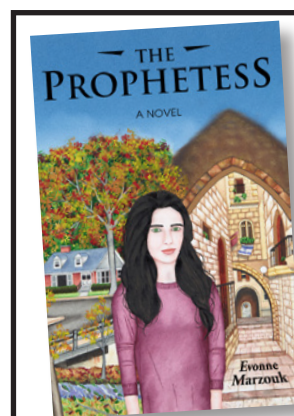
engaged and committed.

Hire full-time teachers. A number of schools have made the conscious decision to hire teachers on a full-time basis in order to build in time for regular professional development. When schools hire only part-time teachers, those teachers often run out as soon as their teaching ends. Even if they want to grow professionally, many part-time teachers aren't given the time to devote to professional growth.

Teachers' professional growth needs to be a top priority. Research and experience show that when teachers participate in ongoing, regular, meaningful professional learning and development, teaching is more effective, students learn better, working conditions improve, teacher retention is higher, school culture becomes one of reflection, collaboration and creativity, and administrators have data to make important decisions.

Of course, what ultimately allows schools to make time for teachers' professional growth is financial resources. Administrators and lay leaders must make a strong case to their boards and other stakeholders that financial investment in a school's professional development budget will have direct, valuable and enduring impact.

Nothing within a school has more impact upon students in terms of skills development, self-confidence, or classroom behavior than the personal and professional growth of their teachers. When teachers individually and collectively examine, question, reflect on their ideals, and develop new practices that lead toward those ideals, the school and its inhabitants are alive. When teachers stop growing, so do their students. (Roland Barth, Run School Run)



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Prioritizing Parent Engagement



The most accurate predictor of long-term student achievement is not socioeconomic status, innate ability or even attendance at a prestigious school. The best predictor of student success is the extent to which parents are engaged in encouraging their child's learning and the extent to which they involve themselves in their child's education.

A parent's investment of time and energy in their child's educational upbringing is both a precious gift and a scarce commodity. Parents want to be involved in their child's education, but many parents (working parents in particular) find it challenging to find the time to attend school functions, volunteer at school or remain involved in school life on an ongoing basis. As Jewish day school leaders who seek to educate the "whole child," it is incumbent upon us to focus our attention on parent education and parent engagement as crucial components of our schools' missions. Part of educating the whole child means communicating with and enlisting the help of our students' parents—their very first teachers. We know that when schools partner with parents to create community, cohesion and opportunities for learning and growth, students thrive.

During this particular time of uncertainty, connection and parent engagement are more important than ever. We will need to think even more creatively about the ways in which we meet our families' needs. When thinking about and planning parent engagement opportunities, there are several critical questions that school leaders must first ask themselves:

What is the objective, purpose and meaningful takeaway of the engagement opportunity? Is it for the purposes of community building, parent education, increased communication, volunteering, academic involvement or something else?

What are some events or gatherings that already exist at your school that can be enhanced by inviting parents to attend? Can these be offered virtually? Perhaps parents are not currently invited to Kabbalat Shabbat or morning tefillah, but if they were, they would have a chance to meaningfully participate in their child's daily routine.

Does the time of day that an event is offered allow many parents to attend, participate or view it? Can the event or learning session be offered more than once at a different time of day, on a different day of the week, or recorded for later digital viewing?

Here are some ideas to help with parent engagement efforts.

COMMUNITY BUILDING

- Create Family Fun Nights (organized by the Parent Association as an off campus event).
- Invite parents to attend Kabbalat Shabbat, Torah service, tefillah or morning school-wide assemblies, or classroom morning meetings.
- Set up a coffee bar or another location on campus for parents to gather and shmooze with one another before or after carpool.
- Create parent-only morning meetings—by grade level or division, and led by the school counselor or division head—so parents can get to know each other on a deeper level.
- Host an event such as a Pancake Breakfast, Muffins with Moms and Special Friends, or Donuts with Dads and Special Friends, where parents gather with their children and other parents over a meal first thing in the morning.
- Partner with your local synagogue and host grade level family Shabbat dinners or Havdalah services.

PARENT EDUCATION

- Host Parent Coffees, a platform for discussing grade-level specific topics, social-emotional topics, academic content areas, developmentally appropriate practices and more.
- Invite guest lecturers and educational speakers.
- Create workshops to assist parents with middle school, high school or college admission processes.

COMMUNICATION

- Publish an annual calendar with important dates listed far in advance so parents can plan to attend.
- Post daily happenings across campus on various social media channels so parents can be aware of the goings on (and have talking points to use with their children), even if they can't be physically present on campus.

VOLUNTEERING

- Invite parents to serve as chaperones or drivers on field trips.
- Create a Helping Hands program, in which teachers request ongoing parent assistance with anything from cutting and gluing a special project to shopping for a special cooking activity or serving as a guest reader in class.



- Have the head of school invite a parent to serve on a committee or task force to develop parent leadership.
- Invite parents to assist with teacher appreciation events.
- Ask parents to participate in and help set up schoolwide celebrations of Jewish or secular holidays; some preparation can be done during the day in-person or at night in advance of the event.

ACADEMIC INVOLVEMENT

- Call home to report positive interactions with peers, classroom teachers or other faculty members.
- Develop explicit and articulated goals for each child that are then monitored at home and at school via a behavior chart or Google doc, in order to stress the home-school partnership.
- Prioritize parent-teacher conferences.
- Send timely, informative and meaningful progress reports/report cards.

If Not Now, When: Connecting Jewish Concepts of Time to STEAM

Educational systems operate on a timed schedule, and curriculum, especially at Jewish schools, is often a reflection of the holidays and events of the season. While the themes of the calendar year provide easy content and predictable timing for Jewish studies curricula, there can be equal advantages to leveraging the calendar for the development of curricula in other domains—in particular, STEAM. We have found that some subjects are best broached organically within the timing of the curriculum rather than close to the holiday itself, allowing for rich scientific learning that can be used later on during a Jewish celebration.

Experimenting with straw-filled and straw-less bricks at Passover, or coming up with innovative approaches to hanukkiyot or dreidels are obvious holiday-related STEAM opportunities. Jewish concepts of time can also encourage connections to STEAM-related explorations. Here are a few of the ways that we apply STEAM to themes of Jewish time.

UNDERSTANDING THE JEWISH CALENDAR AS A TOPIC IN THE STUDY OF SPACE

Mishenichnas Adar, marbim besimchah. When Adar begins, joy increases. Ta'anit 29

In third grade, as students study space they learn about the rotation of planets and celestial bodies. As part of this unit of study, they are given a journal in which to track their observations of the waxing and waning of the moon, the basis of the Jewish calendar. By tracking the dates between Tu Bishvat and Purim, students get an important understanding of the lunar cycle as it relates to Jewish holidays. Being able to identify the first of Adar by tracking the moon creates an opportunity for understanding how in ancient times holidays were able to be celebrated at the same time in different locations.

STUDYING ARVIT AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO STUDY CIRCUITRY

Golel or mipnei choshekh, ve-choshekh mipnei or. Rolling light from darkness and darkness from light. Arvit Service

In fourth grade, students study the Arvit service as well as the ceremony of Kiddush Levanah, the Sanctification of the Moon. As students dig deeper into the prayer Ma'ariv



Aravim, they focus on the imagery of darkness and light, and the definition of day and night in a Jewish context. In this process they revisit and build upon their third-grade encounters with the sun and the moon.

They are given the opportunity to experiment with becoming *yotzrei or*, creators of energy in the form of light through the study of circuitry. As the students build electrical circuits, they are able to design lunar decorations that illuminate the space outdoors where they participate in Kiddush Levanah. Spiraling curriculum to explore new aspects of previously learned material, connecting those concepts both to different aspects of time (i.e., day and night), and introducing concepts of engineering to these lessons all reinforce and build new associations and relevance to Jewish concepts of time.



COUNTING THE OMER WITH STEAM

And you shall count for yourselves—from the day after the holiday, from the day on which the waved Omer offering is brought, seven complete weeks. Until (but not including) the day after the seventh week, you shall count (until) the fiftieth day, and you shall bring a new meal offering to Hashem. Vayikra 25:15-16

The tradition of counting the Omer is often taught close to Passover, so that when the students are celebrating the second night of the holiday, they can begin to fulfill the mitzvah of sefirat HaOmer. This theme of measurement of time provides the perfect opportunity to combine math and Jewish studies, since the mitzvah clearly states the counting, the weeks, the multiplication of the weeks and days.

The Omer can also be used as an opportunity to explore science. In fifth grade, when students learn about meteorology, one of the hardest concepts to visualize is that gases have density. An

even harder concept is that each gas has a different density. The atmosphere has five layers, meaning there are five different densities that can “pile up” one on top of the other.

Since it is hard to imagine the concept of gases “piling up,” this year we used liquids as a more concrete means to visualize the concept. The fifth graders were challenged with creating solutions with sugar and water, five solutions with different amounts of sugar and hence different densities, adding food coloring to identify each solution. Using a dropper, they dripped the solutions into a clear straw, one solution at a time. Starting with the most dense, proceeding to the least, students observed how the solutions “pile up.”

Using these lessons on density, the students were given the challenge of creating an Omer counter. In the end, students decided to use seven acrylic transparent cylinders, marking each cylinder in seven equal parts. The students chose a category of materials (liquid, solids that are found in nature, seeds and others), then researched the density of a variety of items in their chosen category. When the Omer is counted in April-May, each cylinder is to be filled with different types of materials, some solid, some liquid, each chosen based on properties that had been learned in science class.

During the Omer, students pour into that week’s cylinder 1/7 of a material that stacks above the prior day’s material. Before pouring the material, students need to calculate the volume of each material needed, using skills that they have learned in their math class, and consider the properties of that material. For example, higher density liquids need to be on the bottom. However, in the case of seeds, students found that placing sesame seeds above avocado pits result in the seeds trickling through the gaps between the pits, so that the lower density seeds need to be placed at the bottom. Over the course of the 49 days, a display showcases the various densities and other properties of the materials, while illustrating the counting of each day of the Omer.

Given that shortly after Purim with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic our school transitioned to a virtual classroom platform, the final aspects of the Omer counter is being created by students at home, with each student responsible creating a tube to serve as a seven-day counter. As the Omer is counted daily across the school, different clusters of seven students will be assigned to share their combined efforts with different classrooms throughout the school each day.

A FLEXIBLE CALENDAR

Ve-im lo achshav, eimatai? And if not now, when? Avot 1:14

While it is important to have an overall concept of the educational path for the year, it is also important to understand class culture and individual student needs and interests as they evolve throughout the year. By taking concepts that were of interest to the students and finding ways to show their relevance throughout the year, learning becomes more meaningful, accessible and timeless.

In the instance of the Omer counter, we noticed student fascination with notions of density and buoyancy, and student interest in projects involving those concepts. Looking for an opportunity to create further relevance to this topic, we decided to give the Omer challenge immediately—in February, and not wait another two months for the calendar to invite the challenge.

Often teachers find themselves lacking in time. For example, how does one find enough time to do justice to the teaching of Sukkot when the holiday begins only five days after Yom Kippur (two of which are often a weekend)? Similarly, the Omer is often shortchanged due to the calendar restrictions of Passover break.

With this in mind, in mid-February the STEAM educator conducted a hevruta learning session on texts related to the Omer, challenging students to connect their learning of the Omer to their STEAM lessons. While the timing may not have aligned with the preparations for Purim that were happening throughout the rest of the school, the depth of the connections that were made by the students will have a greater impact, both in terms of the context within STEAM learning and the flexibility of time to learn deeper without the limitations of the calendar. The Omer counter was created in advance to be used to count the Omer at the actual time, extending the lessons of density beyond its slot within the scope and sequence of instruction.

By allowing ourselves to connect topics of instruction at times that are relevant to the learning rather than according to calendar sequence, we can further solidify our students’ ability to make connections between STEAM and religious life, and deepen the relevance and engagement of learning.