Religious Purposefulness
in this issue:

Religious Purposefulness in Jewish Day Schools  
• by Dr. Michael S. Berger, page 6

School as Shul: Day Schools in the Religious Lives of Parents  
• by Dr. Alex Pomson, page 14

An Approach to G-d-Talk  
• by Dr. Ruth Ashrafi, page 16

Jewish Identities in Process: Religious Purposefulness in a Pluralistic Day School  
• by Rabbi Marc Baker, page 20

The Challenge of Tradition and Openness in Tefillah  
• by Rabbi Aaron Frank, page 22

Goals and Preparation for a Tefillah Policy  
• by Tzivia Garfinkel, page 25

A Siddur of Our Own  
• by Ray Levi, PhD, page 26

From Minyan to Cheshbon HaNefesh  
• by Rabbi Leslie Lipson, page 27

Teaching Mitzvot: Challenges, Opportunities, and Questions  
• Interview with Rabbi Achiya Delouya, page 32

Remember to Light a Fire  
• by Mariashi Groner, page 36

Serving the Reluctantly Jewish Student  
• by Rabbi Avi Weinstein, page 42

A Word from the Editor, page 3 · President’s Message, page 4 · Annual Leadership Conference, page 18 · Project
SuLaM Summer Institute and Phase 2, page 35 · Project
ROPE Launches in Five Schools, page 38 · Training Institute
in Jewish Social Justice, page 43 · RAVSAK Launches
SuLaM Alumni Network, page 44 · Bookcase, page 46 ·
Re/Presenting the Jewish Past, page 46
From the Editor

by Dr. Barbara Davis

I have always enjoyed the academic calendar, because it has a defined beginning and ending. I have always wondered how one could do a job that never finishes, but continues for fifty weeks or so, is interrupted by a couple of weeks of vacation, and then resumes an endless flow. When working in a school, no matter what kind of year you might be having, you know that it will end, and that there will be a new beginning in the fall. The fact that the Jewish calendar parallels the school calendar has always been a special plus for me. Unlike the secular calendar, which places the new year in the dead of winter, the Jewish calendar sees fall not as autumnal but as a beginning, the head of the year, almost like a second spring.

These thoughts arose as I, like you, prepare to reopen my school to our wonderful students, their families and their teachers. My inspiration comes also from reviewing the articles in the present issue of HaYidion. This issue represents something of a departure for us from our normal examination of the basics of Jewish education—the structures, challenges and curricular issues with which we all must deal. Instead, it presents us with a philosophical framework for our work, an examination of the day school movement in the context of the state of Judaism in the 21st century in the United States and, to a lesser extent, in the Jewish communities of Canada, Europe, and around the globe.

Our format is somewhat atypical also, in that many of our contributors are responding to our lead article, Dr. Michael Berger’s fascinating essay on our theme, “religious purposefulness.” The authors whose responses are included, as well as other articles on the topic, will undoubtedly give you much to ponder and discuss at the start of the new year. For my own part, I intend to order extra copies of this RAVSAK journal to distribute to my faculty, board, and members of our community, to foster greater understanding of the critical and central role of the community day school movement in creating a Jewish future.

I am sure you will also find much food for thought in this issue, and I invite you to enjoy the feast. May the year 5769 bring our RAVSAK schools only good things, recognition of the profound importance of the work we do, and joy and success in all our undertakings. L’shana tova!

Dr. Barbara Davis
is the Secretary of RAVSAK, Editor of HaYidion and Head of School at the Syracuse Hebrew Day School in Dewitt, NY. Barbara can be reached at shds@twcny.rr.com.

Small School Professional Development Scholarship

The RAVSAK Small School Professional Development Scholarship will make the training, networking and professional development opportunities of the RAVSAK Annual Leadership Conference accessible to educators from small Jewish day schools and small Jewish communities across North America.

The scholarship program will provide up to 20 heads of schools with full scholarships to the 2009 RAVSAK Annual Leadership Conference in San Francisco. Expenses covered by the scholarship include conference registration fees, two night’s hotel stay and a travel.

For more information and a copy of the application, go to www.ravsak.org, or contact Robin Feldman, Director of Member Services at rfeldman@ravsak.org or 212-665-1320 x 303.

Information on the 2009 Annual Leadership Conference is available online at www.ravsak.org/conference.

The deadline for applications is October 3, 2008.

The Small School Professional Development Scholarship is made possible by a most generous grant from the Jacob and Hilda Blaustein Foundation.
All of us are actively engaged in the beginning our new school year, and I hope you are reaping the rewards of your successful programs and activities. This is also a very dynamic time at RAVSAK. I am pleased to share with you some of the exciting developments taking place.

I would like to welcome Dorit Zmiri as our new Judaic Studies position to the RAVSAK Executive Board. This position will help support our Hebrew Language and Judaic Studies professionals and strengthen the network among these colleagues. Dorit is an experienced and talented educator. She is Boston Jewish Community Day School’s Middle School Director and Coordinator of Jewish Studies. Dorit has taught and supervised K-12 in both Hebrew and Judaic Studies. Her enthusiasm and leadership makes her a wonderful mentor and I know that she will add a tremendous amount to RAVSAK in this new position. Dorit has a BA from Tel Aviv University and a degree in Jewish Studies from Hebrew College in Brookline, MA.

RAVSAK has been fortunate to receive grants from a number of foundations who support the very important work we do in the field of Jewish education. Project Rope: Roots of Philanthropy Education, with a grant from the Jewish Teen Funders Network, provide opportunities to teach teens about the tzedakah’s value and importance in Jewish tradition. As educators, we know the importance of learning experientially; this project gives our high schoolers the hands-on learning experience of running a fundraising campaign for a cause in their local communities and in Israel.

Through a generous grant, the Jacob and Hilda Blaustein Foundation is supporting professional development of our heads of school by establishing the Small School Professional Development Scholarship. The scholarship program will provide up to 20 heads of small schools full scholarships to the 2009 RAVSAK Annual Leadership Conference in San Francisco. Applications will be available in September on our website. Because of this opportunity, our conference planners are planning new sessions specifically for those from small schools and small Jewish communities.

We have also received a wonderful grant from the Jewish Funds for Justice. Supporting our Middle School teachers, this grant will involve a training seminar in social justice education this fall, particularly relevant for this age group’s intense interest in fairness and peer group. For all of these programs, look for longer descriptions and contact information to register your schools throughout the pages of this issue.

You’ll notice as well that the RAVSAK staff is growing by leaps and bounds. The Executive Committee welcomes three new colleagues to the RAVSAK offices: Shaya Klechevsky, Assistant to the Executive Director, Rachel Bergstein, High School Coordinator, and Rafi Cohen, Davidson Intern.

The strength of RAVSAK is in our networking—I know its membership and professionals have supported all aspects of my school’s programs and leadership. RAVSAK is leading the way in Jewish education. We can all take pride in the work of our executive director, Dr. Marc Kramer, our professional staff, and our generous supporters.

As a new resident of the Bay Area, I look forward to seeing you at the San Francisco Conference this January.

B’vracha,

Susan Weintrob
I WANT TO BE A RABBI, CANTOR OR CHAPLAIN BUT... 

I have family and professional commitments.
Our Sunday to Tuesday schedule of classes allows accomplished professionals to fulfill both their commitments and dreams.

I’m too old.
86% of our students are 35-65 years old and their rich life experience and maturity are an invaluable asset.

I feel more committed to pluralistic Judaism rather than a specific denomination.
As a Transdenominational school, our faculty and curriculum represent the teachings and traditions of all of Judaism’s denominations.

I live too far from any school that provides this training.
44% of our students commute weekly from No. California, San Diego, Orange County, Nevada, Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas.

NO MORE BUTS!

Learn more about AJR, CA by calling 310-824-1586 or visit www.ajrca.org.

AJR, CA is located at The Yitzhak Rabin Hillel Center for Jewish Life at UCLA.
RECENTLY taught an undergraduate course entitled “Early and Medieval Judaism.” While there were several main themes to the course, one of the central distinctions I tried to get the students to see was that over Judaism’s long history, there have been two broad types of Judaic communities: “natural” and “intentional.”

“Natural” and “Intentional” Judaic Communities

“Natural communities” consist of people who share social, ethnic or national bonds, have common customs and practices, and recognize a set of basic symbols and beliefs as distinctly their own. Boundaries with others are usually porous, and there is generally tolerance for a wide range of practice and belief.

For instance, in the Second Temple period, most Jews believed in a single, invisible God, circumcised their sons, and kept the Sabbath as a day of rest and kashrut in some way. Jews tended to live near each other and worship or read Torah together, though many non-Jews, known as “God-fearers,” were loosely connected to Jewish communities. The traditional Jewish societies among Christians and Muslims, where individuals imitated their parents’ way of life (or simply knew of no other), were “natural communities.”

“Intentional communities,” on the other hand, are made up of like-minded people who self-consciously choose to live a life that they view as superior to others. The community’s sense of purpose can be based on many things: the belief in an imminent end of days, a utopian vision of society, or strict adherence to a set of rules. In contrast to natural communities, this community’s boundaries are clear, its observances are precisely defined and its discipline is much stricter.

Examples of this sort abound in Judaism (as in every religious tradition). The Dead Sea Scroll community was made up of messianic Jews preparing for a major battle between the Sons of Light and Sons of Darkness; 16th century Kabbalists in Safed believed daily practice, if done with the right intention, had supernatural, even cosmic effects; and the early Labor Zionists had a clear vision of the “new Jew” who would create a utopian classless society based on agriculture. In all cases, life was lived “deliberately” in the sense that individuals infused their daily behaviors with significance.

Understandably, intentional communities held an allure for only a minority of the Jewish population. Average Jews tended to inhabit natural communities, where they wore their identity more effortlessly, behaved less self-consciously, and perpetuated themselves simply by having families in which children imitated adults. Natural communities, however, tended to thrive when the surroundings set the Jew apart legally, socially or economically. Once those boundaries were lowered, natural communities historically found it hard to maintain their distinctiveness, and within a few generations declined.

The Relationship of Intentional and Natural Communities

Of course, throughout Jewish history these two types of communities interacted to varying degrees and in different ways. Some intentional communities, like the Essenes, moved far away from everyone else to build separate societies with minimal contact with other Jews; others, like the medieval pietists or kabbalists, created enclaves within the natural community, living among other Jews but maintaining separate institutions, like synagogues or study circles, and dedicating themselves fully to their vision of the ideal life.

Some intentional communities, however, were more integrated within the larger Jewish society. What enabled them to do this—maintain their distinctiveness yet be a part of the wider community—was their ability to become the “core” of the natural community: to have other Jews accept their view of the ideal Jewish life,
adopt their values and perhaps some of their practices, and designate members of the intentional community as their leaders. Medieval Jewish society, particularly the smaller Ashkenazic communities of Europe, came to revere the rabbinic scholarly elite as their “core,” and Hasidic communities had the zaddik or “rebbe” and his circle at their center. In both cases, we can see the natural community arrayed in concentric peripheral circles around an intentional core, with mutual interactions across the boundaries. Thus, the core may share its intentionality with the natural community and thus strengthen or intensify the latter’s distinctiveness (think of a yeshiva’s or rabbi’s public classes or a Hasidic rebe’s tisch, farbrengen or talks), while the natural community supplies human and material resources to help maintain the core. The relationship can be symbiotic and mutually fulfilling, though on occasion it can lead to elitist abuse and popular resentment.

Indeed, the intentional core need not be its own independent community. Particularly in our individualistic society, where membership in communities is elastic and ever-changing and most people feel part of multiple communities, establishing a vibrant yet stable core is a challenge. In a growing number of religious communities, a constellation of trained and talented individuals—not all with formal training—serve as an intentional core to a wider social circle. We see this in successful American churches and synagogues—inspiring, charismatic people who serve in multiple capacities within their community. They are its deliberate, thoughtful center.

Understanding Intentionality

By “intentionality,” I mean leading a Jewishly purposeful life in a self-conscious way: having the ability to explain one’s practice in Jewishly meaningful terms, to ground one’s decision-making in Judaism’s rich tradition, and lend “Jewish significance” to one’s daily or regular activities. What are the features of this intentionality?

Response by Rabbi Jay Goldmintz

As a proud graduate of the kind of community day school that Berger describes and celebrates, I cannot help but agree with the case he makes for a purposeful and “intentional” education. Yet I now find myself associated professionally with the kind of day school and community which are much more akin to the “natural” “mimetic” community which he describes, and it is through that prism that I read and respond to his remarks.

In truth, based on his descriptions, I am not quite sure to which community I belong. On the one hand, there are many schools where adherence to Halakkah is a core value and at the same time “where ethnic identity is strong and a sense of Jewish distinctiveness assumed.” Yet I would not say that there is “no need to cultivate a deliberately Jewish life” nor would I describe “the ritual life of the school as unreflective.” Perhaps this is true in the most insular and haredi of communities, although I would suspect in a smaller number than we would imagine, given the dire warnings that one hears from that community about the evils of the Internet. What we are speaking about here is the challenge of modernity, and the tensions that exist in living in a society that is so open and so often at odds with our own values, a society with which our students may be far more familiar and by which they are more enticed. The challenge of a purposeful education, then, is one which faces almost all of us.

Berger calls for schools to be mission-driven and to have an articulated vision that informs the school’s own decisions and which should be shared “if necessary” to the wider school community. Absent from the list of constituents are the students themselves. Our vision needs first and foremost to be shared outright with our students on a regular basis, at every opportunity that we can find, for we can no longer rely upon the fact that they will get it by osmosis from either home or school. Precisely because our students are so immersed in the secular world, it behooves us more than ever to articulate for them exactly what our purpose is, regardless of how we define it. We can have a vision, Jewish choices, ritual, language, texts and the like and yet still have students who do not “get it.”

In my own community there was a time when it was suggested that there was no need to define or articulate what integration of Torah and the modern world was about. Teach them the best of American and Jewish tradition and the integration will take place within the student himself, people said. For a variety of reasons, I believe this approach is no longer tenable, if indeed it ever was. In a recent study of thousands of teens across the country and across faiths, interviewers were astounded by how inarticulate students were about their own faith. Citing philosopher Charles Taylor, who suggested that inarticulacy undermines the possibilities of reality, the study claims that “religious faith, practice, and commitment can be no more than vaguely real when people cannot talk much about them. Articulacy fosters reality.” The purposefulness, then, must not only be incorporated into the construct of the school’s implicit or hidden curriculum; it must be explained overtly to the students themselves so that instruction in these most precious of educational values becomes explicit.

If intentionality means making choices, then now more than ever before our students need to be able not only to make the right choices (however we may define them) but to give voice to why these choices are so purposeful. Only then can we hope that they will be able to create a core whose intentions radiate to the community at large.

Rabbi Jay Goldmintz, Headmaster of Ramaz Upper School in New York City and Doctoral Student Fellow at Azrieli Graduate School, Yeshiva University, has written a number of articles related to adolescent religious development and education.

A central, if not primary, component of intentionality is having a vision of an ideal Jewish life and being able to explain why working towards that goal is meaningful. At first glance, those with faith in the supernatural, such as revelation, divine reward and punishment, or mysticism would have an easier time articulating a vision. However, the history of Zionism and Mordecai Kaplan’s Reconstructionism both show that one can generate a deep vision of the ideal Jewish life without resort to supernatural or metaphysical claims.

Secondly, because I take intentionality to mean leading a deliberate life with Jewishly meaningful choices, it entails finding that source of meaning not within oneself or one’s needs, but in Judaism. In a word, the touchstone of one’s choices (broadly speaking) is Judaism, not the self. One rich mine for meaning is Judaism’s millennia-long textual tradition. The Bible, Mishnah and Talmud, midrashic compilations, biblical commentaries, the Zohar and other mystical texts, and medieval and more recent codes are rich sources of Jewish meaning. For those who observe Halakhah and see in Judaism a legal code, the purposefulness is embedded in obedience to that set of laws, though we should be quick to add that even among Orthodox Jews, rote performance without awareness of the reasons or significance of one’s behaviors would be a feature of a ‘natural’ Judaic community as existed widely in pre-war Eastern Europe.

Non-halakhic Jews can also frame their view of the tradition in normative terms by deliberately engaging with the Jewish textual tradition. One’s decision-making must be reflective and thoughtful, not haphazard or convenient, and grounded in Jewish sources without necessarily being ipso facto subservient to them. Early Reform’s emphasis on the prophetic tradition is an example of an ‘intentional’ Jewish life, where textual sources of Judaism were the touchstone of one’s religious choices, even if Reform’s interpretive framework allowed them to reach conclusions quite different from those of Jewish tradition to that point. Jewish history can also be incorporated into this thought process, as the founders of Conservative Judaism and Reconstructionism sought to do, though I believe bringing in Jewish history as a “source” of Judaism is based on notions of Jewish peoplehood that in today’s environment of religious individualization.

[CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE]

... to have other Jews accept their view of the ideal Jewish life, adopt their values and perhaps some of their practices, and designate members of the intentional community as their leaders.

Non-halakhic Jews can also frame their view of the tradition in normative terms by deliberately engaging with the Jewish textual tradition. One’s decision-making must be reflective and thoughtful, not haphazard or convenient, and grounded in Jewish sources without necessarily being ipso facto subservient to them. Early Reform’s emphasis on the prophetic tradition is an example of an ‘intentional’ Jewish life, where textual sources of Judaism were the touchstone of one’s religious choices, even if Reform’s interpretive framework allowed them to reach conclusions quite different from those of Jewish tradition to that point. Jewish history can also be incorporated into this thought process, as the founders of Conservative Judaism and Reconstructionism sought to do, though I believe bringing in Jewish history as a “source” of Judaism is based on notions of Jewish peoplehood that in today’s environment of religious individualization.

2. Haym Soloveitchik characterizes the natural community as “mimetic” and the intentional community as a “text tradition.” See his “Rupture and Reconstructions: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy,” Tradition 28:4 (1994): 64-130. While I find his distinction helpful for a description of Orthodoxy, I feel the distinction of “natural” and “intentional” communities cuts across all denominations, and is thus more helpful for the purposes of this essay.
eralism cannot be assumed but must be articulated and defended.

A third feature of Jewish purposefulness is regularity and commitment—in other words, a life with ritual. Implicit in the notion of an intentional religious life is the assertion that religion makes claims upon us to which we must respond, that Judaism is not merely a resource for us when and if we want or need it. Like all great traditions, Judaism is able to teach us, challenge us, inspire us and elevate us—not just to affirm us. Admittedly, this may be at odds with our contemporary therapeutic American culture, where relevance to one’s own needs and aspirations is often the basis for significance. But as we saw, an intentional community is defined by some notion of behavioral standards and disciplined performance with the promise of a higher, richer, more meaningful life.

A tradition is able to perform its instructive and elevating role precisely because it includes regular, consistent engagement and ritualistic behavior by practitioners for whom the only question is how, not whether, to engage. In an intentional community, members strive to retain the spiritual vitality of its rituals, but they never abandon them when not in the mood.

Living a Jewish calendar is thus an essential ingredient in the religiously purposeful life. Annual or more regular celebrations provide significance in embodied, even sensual ways and become occasions to dig into Judaism’s deep reservoir of sources and history for meaning. Jewish holidays that are essentially family reunions, or which lack ritual and reflection, may be enjoyable, but they are features of natural, not intentional, communities. As I noted above, purposefulness implies giving the tradition its voice(s), an activity that involves a degree of honesty and seriousness, acknowledging the presence of many voices and values within the tradition even if only one resonates with us.

Vision, engagement with Jewish sources, reflective performance of regular ritual—these are what I take to be the elements of a purposeful Jewish community.

Response by Rabbi Aaron Panken, Ph.D.

Berger’s insightful piece draws upon a particularly interesting model utilized by scholars of Jewish history: the natural vs. intentional community. In applying this idea to the contemporary communal context, Berger gives voice to a nostalgic tendency in Jewish life, one that looks fondly back upon the communities of the past (the rebbes of Europe and their followers, for example) as somehow better and more solidly constructed than those we experience today. At the same time, his writing is hopeful: he indicates that we can still establish a “vibrant yet stable core,” despite the many challenges that face our community—and that Jewish day schools are critical to this essential goal.

While I certainly applaud Berger’s idea of establishing learned communities of Jews of every stripe, I also wonder about the very concept of a “core.” In the postmodern context, we live in a world that has come to be defined more by loosely attached networks than tight concentric circles around a core. These networks are precisely a response to the problems with a core: cores can be monolithic, exclusive, their participants somewhat uniform. Cores suffer from the particularly daunting challenge of maintaining a strong relationship with their peripheries and having strained relationships with outsiders. As Berger also notes, while cores evince strength on the inside, without constant communal support and ongoing validation of their priority, even the strongest core can decay over time.

I would suggest that we consider expanding Berger’s idea from the core/ periphery model to that of a newer paradigm: the “distributed network.” Networks are redundant, pluriiform and widely communicative—they link various disparate nodes that each serve different functions, and build linkages that harness individual, localized abilities and knowledge into global chains whose power and abilities far exceed those of the individuals they unite. If one node of a network fails or weakens, the other nodes can step in to hold the network together, providing greater resilience. And even if nodes of a network disagree, they can still continue to communicate and work together through a mediated relationship.

Consider, for example, the power of a wiki, a search engine, or JDate, and how these now play into Jewish life. Rather than seeking a rabbi (a “core” strategy) to answer a difficult, embarrassing, or overly simple question, many Jews now turn far more to Google, Wikipedia, blogs, or other such sources (a “network” strategy) to find multiple potential answers they can evaluate, select, and utilize. While the information in these sources is often unmediated and even sometimes wrong, the collective wisdom of the entire community can find expression through the give-and-take in these conversations, and a mediated truth eventually emerges.

On the JDate front, rather than seeking a partner at Jewish singles events or through a traditional shadchan, more and more our friends find mates and dates through online networks where they consider and select individuals they feel are appropriate. And the younger the generation, the more pronounced this tendency. If knowledge (or a wonderful Jewish spouse) is available from such resources, young Jews will be seeking, leading, and interacting with these resources. And as they change these resources, the resources change them and the way they behave as well. Such is the power of the network in our contemporary scene.

From this perspective, then, I would submit that the task of Jewish day schools in creating graduates who live purposeful Jewish lives is just as important, but slightly different from Berger’s conception. In essence, day schools must move beyond seeing themselves as creators of a privileged core elite of intentional Jews.
The Day School as an Intentional Community: Ensuring the Core

We live in a time and place where Jewish ethnic and social bonds that 50 years ago seemed so self-evident and sustainable are proving to be thin and unstable. The individualistic, highly mobile and multicultural environment of North America, coupled with the abandonment of traditional Jewish social markers such as endogamy (in-marriage), Shabbat and kashrut by the majority of Jews, has brought about the decline of the “natural” Judaic community. Put another way, the conditions that ensured the persistence of a large natural Judaic community for centuries—legal, religious or cultural exclusion from the wider society and thorough ritual distinctiveness—are gone, and a residual ethnic or even nostalgic identity is hard to sustain and will, according to most sociologists, be only partially successful.

With few alternatives, I submit that the Jewish community as a whole must look to ensuring a more vibrant intentional community that can accomplish two things: serve as the current “core” for the wider Jewish population, and help cultivate “intentional Jews” who will make up the core of their own communities when they are adults. I believe that Jewish day schools across the denominational spectrum can fill that vital role—but only if they are Jewishly purposeful themselves, and empower and encourage their graduates to be the same.3

I hope I have already successfully sketched out the critical ingredients for a purposeful Judaic community. As applied to day schools, it means first and foremost the articulation of a vision—stated clearly and unabashedly—how leading an intentional Jewish life adds meaning and richness to one’s existence, both as a Jew and as a human being. As in all mission-driven schools, these need to be the poles for every decision within the school, and if necessary, taught to the wider school community through parent and board education.4

If the Jewish tradition is to be, in some form, the touchstone of one’s decision-making, then students must achieve familiarity with it. The Judaics curriculum must aim at a reasonable level of literacy, by which I mean knowledge of the rich and lengthy textual tradition of Judaism and the history of the Jewish people as well. Judaic courses must both teach and model reflective practice, noting the basis for school practice and cultivating in students the capacity to make those intentional choices themselves.

To achieve this level of literacy, I think day schools cannot shy away from the goal of Hebrew fluency in their students. Only knowledge of Hebrew will enable day school alumni to engage the manifold Jewish sources in the original. If our graduates are to be able to hear Judaism speak in its own voices, they must understand the language—otherwise, they are handicapped and dependent on others to tell them what the tradition says and even means (translations are helpful, but only up to a point, as they necessarily miss the nuances of the original and impose the translator’s interpretations on the reader). The importance of Hebrew can be underscored in school communications, in speeches at graduation, and of course the curriculum itself. Serious engagement

---

Senior Educators Program
of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem
Melton Centre for Jewish Education

- Explore Innovative Approaches to Jewish Education
- Probe Critical Issues in Jewish Thought
- Generous Stipends for Study and Living Expenses

The Senior Educators Program offers Jewish educators from all over the world, representing every stream of contemporary Jewish life, a unique opportunity for professional development and personal enrichment. The one-year program is held at the Melton Centre for Jewish Education at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The program accepts only five North American candidates a year.

Applications Currently Being Accepted for the 2009 Academic Year

For more information, contact Jonathan Fass at jonathan.fass@gmail.com, Mandy Huglin at mandyh@savion.huji.ac.il, or go online at sep.huji.ac.il

The Senior Educators Program is a program of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the Jewish Agency for Israel

---

4. Seymour Fox z”l insisted on the centrality of vision in day school education. The volume he co-edited Visions of Jewish Education (New York: Cambridge U P, 2003) includes the effort of several educators from across the Jewish spectrum to articulate realizable Jewish visions in day schools.
with Jewish sources depends on language study driven by standards rather than sentimentiality.

Moreover, the day school calendar must be rich in regular, consistent Jewish observances, including holidays, commemorations and other events. To be clear: I am not insisting that these practices all assume Orthodox or halakhic character, but they do need to be purposeful: based on knowledgeable engagement with the tradition, reflecting commitment, and based on an underlying belief in the value of a Jewish life. I believe that in pluralistic, non-Orthodox settings, a reflective, transparent process whereby communities develop their rituals, understand their bases and meaning and stick to them with some consistency has the capacity to produce an intentional Judaic community.

This type of work does not have to wait until students can grapple with texts; teachers can present stories and concepts to younger children that allow them to begin this intentional activity earlier. However, the curriculum must ultimately evolve developmentally and bring the students to knowledge of, and engagement with, the sources of Judaism and model an increasingly sophisticated, nuanced encounter with the tradition that characterizes an intentional Jewish community. Shabbatons or other experiential activities are additional opportunities to develop this capacity in children.

As Alex Pomson and Randal Schnoor recently showed, this type of Judaic experience also has an impact on adults, both parents and others. Their book illustrates how a day school, a mini-intentional community, helps bring older, more “natural” Jews to greater purposefulness about their Jewishness, without having an explicit outreach agenda. As I noted, natural communities are in search of identity markers, and in the case study presented in the book, the day school became the “intentional core” for the concentric circles.

Berger suggests a heavy mission for Jewish communal day schools, the vast majority of which serve children in grades K-8, when he advocates that the creation of intentional Jewish communities will result in students who can become the core leaders of the next generation. Berger further posits that creating natural Jewish communities will only result in nostalgia and will be unable to withstand the trumpet call of American individualism.

In my view, Berger does not give sufficient weight to the role of parents in the formation of Jewish identity and is placing too much credence in the ability of formal educating institutions to create deep ties. In particular, Berger posits three elements to intentionality: “Vision, engagement with Jewish sources, reflective performance of regular ritual.”

Berger indicates that the holder of vision is both the individual and the school. I would agree that all Jewish schools, whether communal or other types, need to articulate a vision for the future adult life of the student. What troubles me is how much hold this ideal can have if the school ends in grade 8. It is the most unusual child who will have the autonomy in high school to realize and continue any vision offered by the school without additional communal structures in which the vision may be practiced, i.e. the synagogue, youth group, summer camp, or Israel experience. It is very rare for American Jewish children who primarily live in suburbia to have the agency to continue any vision without some type of structure.

Berger suggests two criteria for engagement with Jewish texts: reflective practice and Hebrew fluency. I would suggest a third: the cultivation of the tools for independent further learning. Today’s students are familiar with all the technological tools of the Internet. Even in schools that cannot find authentic Hebrew speakers to teach the language, students can hear correct speech and communicate with Israelis through such technological tools as YouTube and Skype. The greatest limiter to obtaining true Hebrew fluency is the lack of qualified personnel, not the ability of the students. Berger does not address how to include the faculty in creating an intentional community.

The most intriguing element in Berger’s list to create an intentional community is the idea of “reflective performance of regular ritual.” It does not appear that Berger is suggesting the creation of innovative ritual, but rather is advocating for the creation of habits in a conscious manner; however, habit implies a natural occurring community since it is the most unusual student who can resist the tide of social acceptance and engage in ritual without the support of a community. And this continuing support after leaving the comfort of the Jewish day school is what Berger does not adequately address. If the Jewish community provides day high school education, then Berger’s hypothesis has an excellent chance for success. If day school education is only until grade 8, there are too may social contingencies in the crucial years of adolescence that can undo elementary Jewish education. This is the conundrum of all elementary level Jewish day schools: Can the creation of intentional communities until age 13 or 14 have a sufficient impact on adulthood?

Response by Sylvia F. Abrams

Sylvia F. Abrams is professor emeritus of Jewish Education and former dean at Siegal College of Judaic Studies; she currently directs Project 20-20, a partnership between the Central District of the Israel Ministry of Education and Siegal College to explore cross-cultural differences in identity formation with Israeli educators.

5. Back to School: Jewish Day Schools in the Lives of Adults (Wayne State University Press, 2008).
Response by Barry W. Holtz

Berger has made a powerful argument for day schools as settings for “intentional Jewish communities,” places “that help cultivate purposeful Jewish adults.” In many ways, of course, this position reflects our very best dreams for the potential of the day school. Berger’s view of a school energized by an articulated and embodied vision defines the core of a successful school. I applaud his passionate advocacy of that concept; it recalls the late Seymour Fox’s famous dictum that the greatest problem in contemporary Jewish education is its “blandness.” A school with a vision is a school that rejects blandness in favor of inspiration and a sense of direction. I agree wholeheartedly with his articulation of the power and importance of vision in Jewish education.

I would, however, like to suggest a few modifications to his analysis that may be helpful. To begin with, I would be careful about the dichotomous portrait that Berger presents. He divides the world into two quite distinct camps: intentional day schools and natural day schools, mirroring Martin Jaffe’s distinction of two historical modalities of Jewish communities. But while it may be one thing to distinguish the Essenes from their contemporaneous co-religionists or the Lurianic Kabbalists in Safed from the ordinary “Jew in the street” (circa 1570), categorizing 21st century day schools as either “intentional” or “natural” may underestimate the range and complexity of the day school scene in our time.

True, there are day schools that one might better term “private schools for Jews” as opposed to “Jewish private schools.” That is, these are schools with minimal standards for Jewish content and practices. Their main purpose is to allow a place for Jewish children to go to school together in the way that a Jewish country club may be a place that allows Jews to socialize with people like themselves. These are good examples of Berger’s “natural communities.” But aside from institutions of this sort, are the distinctions between intentional and natural day schools all that clear? My sense is that we can better see schools as located on a continuum between the two concepts rather than falling neatly into one or the other camp. Not only that but schools themselves may move around on that continuum depending on the particular leadership, parent population, teachers or other factors, present at any given time.

Moreover, even within any particular school there is likely to be a wide range—between classrooms in which students are encouraged to, as Berger has it, “explain one’s practice in Jewishly meaningful terms” to those where such concepts are never addressed. One classroom seems “intentional” and the other not, but what does that say about defining the school as a whole? Where does it fit?

My other hesitation about Berger’s presentation is his notion that leading a deliberate life... entails finding that source of meaning not within oneself or one’s needs, but in Judaism. In a word, the touchstone of one’s choices...is Judaism, not the self.

To me this notion of the way identity is formed and operates may not accurately reflect the process by which human beings conduct their lives. Once again a bipolar opposition has been proposed here, in this case a split between “the self” and “Judaism.” But the self is not an independent contractor working disconnected from powerful plausibility structures such as “Judaism.” In day-to-day life Judaism is integrated within the self, is part of the self and helps create the self. To say that “the touchstone of one’s choices is Judaism, not the self” is to suggest a kind of model of linear personal decision-making that doesn’t correspond to the familiar life experiences that all of us have. Our choices are probably made in a more circuitous

[CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE]

around it. Similar anecdotes abound.

Of course, day schools can choose to be “natural communities,” extensions of Jewish communities where ethnic identity is strong and a sense of Jewish distinctiveness assumed. Their curriculum will understandably be very different, as there will be no need to cultivate a deliberately Jewish life in the way I described. The ritual life of the school will likely be unreflective, seamlessly connected with that of the home or community—simply based on “this is what we do.” There is certainly a place in the American landscape for such schools. I believe, however, that America’s current climate of religious choice, personal journeys and multiculturalism will mean the decline of natural Judaic communities, and the day schools on this model will leave most alumni unprepared to affirm or embrace a Jewishly purposeful life in adulthood.

Day Schools as Incubators of Intentional Jewish Adults

Aside from being an intentional community itself, the day school also has the capacity to “incubate” intentional Jewish adults.

Day school alumni—and likely a minority of them—have the potential to serve as the “core” of their future communities, the axes around which people and institutions of a more ‘natural’ Judaic character can gather or rally. Their knowledge of sources and Jewish tradition, their ability to elevate practice by articulating its meaning and giving it depth, their skills at leading services, reading Torah, conducting ceremonies and giving divrei Torah—in a word, living a committed Jewish life—is unique among their peers, and can be the ‘intentional core’ around which more natural communities coalesce.

Of course, this means that the day school experience must ensure that these intentional young Jews not merely stick to themselves after graduation, as the medieval mystics did, or move out to their
own communities, as the Qumran community went out to the Dead Sea. Instead, the day school must do its best to instill a sense of avevet (responsibility) to the broader Jewish community, which it can do by encouraging leading services in their synagogues or at elder residences, helping out mourners during their grieving period (possibly by teaching or leading services), taking a lead in designing Jewish community events, serving as youth movement directors, camp counselors, etc. These youngsters, often with better Judaic training than their parents (especially in non-Orthodox schools), should be incentivized to undertake these responsibilities with respect to their fellow Jews (e.g., reduction in day school tuition if they serve as youth movement leaders or camp counselors). With limited resources, Jewish philanthropists can choose to pursue each and every Jew wherever s/he happens to be on the periphery—a costly and high risk approach—or they can wisely invest in strengthening those who can serve as the intentional core of the future Jewish community—provided the schools cultivate and reinforce Judaic intentional- ity.

To be frank, in light of what we know about the developmental, social and psychological aspects of identity formation, with more enduring life choices in most cases occurring only after college or marriage, I am unsure what we can realistically expect of the K-8 day school framework, which ceases when children are 13 or 14. Given the nature of adolescent development, I think a Jewish high school is even more vital in ensuring an “intentional” Jewish adult, though even here the story of formation demonstrated by intentional communities populated by Jews in their 20s and 30s. While such intentional Jewish communities are starting to emerge—Moishe House and Avodah: The Jewish Service Corps, for instance, as well as Yeshivat Hadar, an intensive egalitarian yeshiva in New York—they currently have no relationship with day school students.

Imagine a program in which day school students enter these intentional communities on a regular basis, connecting to the members of these communities and learning from their activities. For instance, a day school program that sends motivated students to learn in the beit midrash of a yeshiva could have multiple benefits: K-12 students would have a live picture of what it means to voluntarily engage in Jewish text study, and live out a passionate Jewish identity. Intentional community members could see themselves as an integrated part of a larger Jewish community, and actively build relationships with the next generation of engaged Jews.

Berger asserts that day schools have the potential to “incubate” intentional Jewish adults. What better way to motivate day school students to continue their engagement with the Jewish community than building frameworks in which students and current members of intentional communities interact on a substantive basis. In a world where individual choice is paramount, a day school education is no guarantee of an engaged Jewish life. But providing concrete models of passionate engagement in Jewish community—the kind best demonstrated by intentional communities—can influence today’s day school students to become tomorrow’s intentional Jewish adults.

Rabbi Elie Kaunfer is the executive director of Mechon Hadar (www.mechon-hadar.org). In May he received the Avi Chai Fellowship, intended to help fund Yeshivat Hadar, the first year-round egalitarian yeshiva in the United States.
Jewish day schools are replacing synagogues as the primary source of Jewish connection and meaning for increasing numbers of adults. Day school parents still maintain synagogue memberships at a rate more than double the national average—according to the 2001 National Jewish Population Survey, 95% compared with 46% of all Jewish adults—but recent qualitative research reveals that many of those parents connect with Judaism most purposefully at their children’s school, not at shul. This phenomenon constitutes a challenge and an opportunity for day school leaders.

Of course, this is isn’t what the last one hundred years of educational or Jewish history led one to expect of schools. As John Dewey put it, schools were intended to be locations where society placed all it had accomplished at the disposal of its future members. They were not expected to perform significant roles in the lives of adults. Likewise, for much of the twentieth century, Jewish day schools appealed most to families whose lives were already rich with Judaism and who feared a future erosion in the intensity of their children’s Jewish lives if they attended public schools. Today’s day school parents are different. Many rely on their children’s Jewish schools to provide the Jewish knowledge, inspiration and community they do not possess at home. Some parents even seek that knowledge, inspiration and community for themselves, having missed out when they were younger.

A great unexplored frontier for day school education may well be their potential to bring Jewish purpose to the lives of parents. The argument, derived from a study of parents at seven different Jewish elementary schools in the United States and Canada, is more fully elaborated in a recently published co-authored book, Back to School: Jewish Day School in the Lives of Adult Jews. The title of one of the book’s key chapters is self-explanatory: “The School as Shul: Jewish Day Schools as Places of Worship, Study and Assembly, for Parents.”

Historically, the synagogue has been identified as performing three primary sociological functions: (1) as beit keneset—a site for social fellowship, indicated by the etymological root of the Greek word synagogue, meaning “place of assembly”; (2) as beit midrash—an educational institution, symbolized by the vernacular Yiddish term shul, meaning “school”; and (3) as beit tefillah—a place of religious worship, the synagogue’s original function in the ancient world.

Today, there is evidence that day schools play all three of these roles, frequently to great effect, but often unknowingly. Most obviously, schools enable parents—through their involvement in their children’s education—to develop new social networks. A parent interviewee once stated as fact to one of our research team, “You always become friends with the parents of your children’s friends.” Actually, we found that this was by no means so for all those we interviewed,

but it was often the case for families on the edge of the mainstream Jewish community such as converts to Judaism, gay couples, interfaith couples, and those who had recently relocated to town. As a result of parking-lot conversations, playdate arrangements, shared involvement as school volunteers, and plain old-fashioned gossip about teachers and administration, families with limited Jewish social networks built webs of connections that became deepened and extended outside school to the extent that parents marked life-cycle occasions in the company of other school families and celebrated Shabbat and festivals with them.

Less expected, there is evidence that day schools provide parents with many opportunities for learning and intellectual growth. This learning is rarely of the programmed variety; that’s why attendance at adult education programs was usually
quite poor in the schools we studied. Parents—unlike older adult Jewish learners—learn while doing, or in order to do (while sitting on a committee or in order to be able to help in the classroom). They do not generally get involved in order to learn. They learn most from their peers rather than from an instructor, and, it turns out, many learn a great deal about Jewish life and practice from what their children bring home from school. Some parents have indicated to us that while their (immigrant) grandparents once served as sources of knowledge and inspiration for Jewish family life—on Friday night, for example, or at the family seder—today, it is their day school children who play this role for the extended family.

Least expected, parents report that they find in schools the kinds of “unimaginable moments of beauty” that seem lacking in synagogues where, as one parent put it, “The program is so scripted.” To put it in more sociological language, there are aspects of school-life that operate at an existential pitch absent from most other Jewish institutions frequented by parents. When the events at school are conducted with authenticity and spontaneity, they enable parents to confront questions of rare personal importance. Parents gain in schools what sociologists of religion call “intimations of the ultimate” of the kind that people tend to experience in hospital delivery rooms and cemeteries.

If it seems shocking to compare schools with cemeteries and hospitals, it’s worth considering for a moment what schools promise parents: the possibility of touching a different future for their children and themselves. When schools successfully embody a sense that the world is somehow different inside their walls, they invite an encounter with the ultimate questions of life, encouraging parents to wonder what their child might become. For Jews, vividly described by Simon Rawidowicz as an ever-dying people, a minority doubtful of its own survival, such ultimate questions can feel even more acute when one visits a Jewish elementary school. Parents can find themselves wondering whether things will be different for this group of Jewish children, whether they will find it less complicated to be Jewish, less difficult to juggle integration and survival.

From my perspective, there is both an opportunity and a challenge here. There is an opportunity to extend the mission of day schools to socialize children into lives of Jewish purpose, since children will find what they learn at school to be more meaningful when they see that it also engages their parents. The challenge for schools is that if they embrace this opportunity it will, first, require opening their doors more widely to parents, and I have found few schools that are not ambivalent about taking such a step. Second, schools need to deter...
An Approach to G-d-Talk

by Dr. Ruth Ashrafi

It is a rare occurrence to encounter G-d as topic in a general conversation. If someone does start talking about Him, people often initially react with embarrassment or unease, or a mixture of both. G-d means different things to different people. For some He is the Creator of the world, for others a Higher Power. Some regard Him as indifferent to human affairs whereas other see Him as a personal G-d who intervenes in the course of history. And again others, although believing in G-d, have not given His exact nature much thought. These views are very personal, and most people find it difficult to speak about G-d openly.

Interestingly, very few people doubt His existence. Whereas in the 1970s and 1980s you could barely pass for an educated person if you admitted to a belief in G-d, over the last decade G-d has definitely made a “comeback.” As someone said: Although He is not the head of the department of philosophy, He is certainly regarded as a well-respected member of the faculty.

So, with the above in mind, how do you talk about G-d in a Jewish community day school? This problem is most acute during the Open House. The audience is filled with prospective parents who want to know what sort of a Jewish education the school offers. Some are afraid that it will be too religious, for others it is not religious enough, and everyone wants to know how the school will handle the differences of belief between Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and non-affiliated children in a classroom.

Interestingly, whatever the student background, elementary students display none of the inhibitions described above when talking about G-d or a host of other topics that older students might find embarrassing. G-d is the person we address in our tefillah, He is the One who looks after our daily needs, He is the G-d of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and He performed many miracles for the Israelites in Egypt and in the desert.

Upon entering grade 7 students begin to question these beliefs, which until now seem to have been self-evident. It is the task of the Jewish educator to help students in this age group grapple with their questions, including their questions about G-d. But how can we create an environment in a pluralistic day school where students feel safe to discuss what they really think about G-d?

Instead of being cause for confusion, the pluralist character of our student population is a great asset for a rich Jewish learning experience. If you would define Judaism as engaging in the study of sacred texts through constructive dialogue, you may prefer study partners whose outlook is different from yours. We all know the famous line: “Two Jews, three opinions.” This can actually be a good thing. In fact, the Torah contains some important stories that deal with the issue of how to speak about G-d in a diverse environment in a very concrete manner.

When G-d spoke the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, there were hundreds of thousands of Israelites listening. With such a large number of witnesses, we would assume that there is just one, definitive version of the Ten Commandments. But that is not the case. There are two versions of the Ten Commandments, one in the Book of Exodus and one in the Book of Deuteronomy, and they differ slightly. Apparently, individual listeners can hear different things in the same oral message and record it differently, and this applies even to an event as significant as G-d’s revelation on Mount Sinai. Why? Because we experience things differently. The Torah records both versions. One is not more important than the other, but both need to be preserved. Of course, the different versions in Exodus and Deuteronomy are explained by many scholars as stemming from different sources that were amalgamated into one document, the Torah as we know it today, by an editor. However, I believe that this theory avoids reading and explaining the text itself.

An even more striking example of different versions of events is found in the Creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2. The first chapter records how G-d, majestically and in an orderly fashion, creates a perfect and harmonious world within six days. “And G-d saw that it was good,” as the text states at the conclusion of every day. G-d’s point of view is the perspective from which the course of events in chapter one is told.
The Creation story in the second chapter is told from a completely different perspective. The reader finds himself in a garden and is observing the course of events without the regular beat of the six days of Creation. “It is not good for man to be alone.” Man was alone? Had we not just read at the end of chapter one that G-d created man and woman together? How can it be that man is suddenly alone in chapter 2? How many books exist where chapter 2 seems to contradict what the reader has learned in chapter 1? Of course, these different accounts of Genesis 1 and 2 are likewise explained by many scholars as originating in different sources, but, again, that theory avoids reading the text itself.

By including both versions of Creations the author of the Torah teaches that there are different perspectives and that reality can look different depending where you are. There is G-d’s perspective on Creation, but Creation looks different from Adam’s viewpoint and this diversity is important enough to be noticed. Even stronger, the omnipotent Creator notices the unhappiness of his creature, Adam, and finds a solution for his loneliness. Reading Genesis 1 and 2 as consecutive and complementary, the Torah does not draw the portrait of an authoritarian G-d who speaks and expects human beings to be happy with what He has decided is best for them. Instead, the combined stories show G-d as the all-powerful Creator who takes a personal interest in the situation of His creatures and who acts on their concerns.

In a later story in Tanakh, it becomes even more clear that G-d is not merely concerned with man, but is looking for a partner with whom He can have a constructive dialogue. When He contemplates the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, He invites Abraham directly to give his opinion on His intended plan by saying, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? … For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right…” (18:17-19)

This is strange. If we suppose that G-d knows everything, why does He want to go on a personal fact-finding mission to Sodom and Gomorrah? He must be well aware that there are no righteous people left in these cities. But if He knows that that is the case, why then does He ask Abraham for his opinion?

And if we compare Abraham’s response with G-d’s own words, we see that Abraham takes his cue from G-d, “doing what is just and right”: “Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?” G-d not only invites Abraham to challenge Him, but He also gives him the words with which to do this. This dialogue between G-d and Abraham is followed in Tanakh by the often fierce conversations of Moses, Jeremiah and Job with G-d.

These stories from Tanakh teach us that G-d did not create us so that He could speak and we would blindly obey Him, but He intended us to be a constructive partner in our dialogue with Him. In His conversation with Abraham, G-d wants him to respond [CONTINUED ON PAGE 44]
The theme of this year’s conference is “Bridges to Tomorrow: Preparing for a Changing Reality.” You will have the opportunity to explore current issues in the community day school field including leadership, Judaic studies, curriculum development, fundraising, time management, and more. This conference will also give you the opportunity to network with colleagues old and new to discuss the future of the Jewish community day school.

Please visit www.ravsak.org/conference (don’t forget the early bird deadline of December 8, 2008) and check regularly for schedule and presenter updates.

We are excited to be holding this year’s conference in San Francisco at the Parc 55 Hotel. The Parc 55 is a sophisticated, upscale and modern hotel which will provide you all the comforts needed during your stay in San Francisco. The hotel is in the heart of downtown San Francisco and is only 14 miles from the San Francisco International Airport. Please use the link above to register for the hotel.

We will also be providing delicious glatt kosher meals at the conference, all included in your conference registration fee. If you have any questions regarding kashrut, please contact the RAVSAK office.

If you have any questions regarding registration, speakers or the conference schedule, please do not hesitate to contact Robin Feldman, Conference Coordinator at 212-665-1320 x 303.

Bathea James
Chair, Conference Planning Committee
Head of School, Tehiyah Day School

Dean Goldfein
Chair, Conference Host Committee
Head of School, Contra Costa Jewish Day School
Reality

Conference Planning Committee*

Jeff Davis
San Diego Jewish Academy, San Diego, CA

Sue Einhorn
Greenfield Day School, Miami, FL

Bathea James, Chair
Tehiyah Day School, El Cerrito, CA

Cathy Lowenstein
Vancouver Talmud Torah, Vancouver, BC

Barbie Prince
The Shoshana S. Cardin School, Baltimore, MD

Naomi Reem
Jewish Primary Day School, Washington, DC

Conference Host Committee*

Hamutal Gavish
Brandeis Hillel Day School, San Rafael, CA

Dean Goldfein
Contra Costa Jewish Day School, Lafayette, CA

Dr. Joan Gusinow
Shalom School, Sacramento, CA

Lillian Howard
Kehillah Jewish High School, Palo Alto, CA

Bathea James
Tehiyah Day School, El Cerrito, CA

Rachel Lewin
Ronald C. Wornick Jewish Day School, Foster City, CA

Julie Smith
Gideon Hausner Jewish Day School, Palo Alto, CA

Susan Weintrob
Ronald C. Wornick Jewish Day School, Foster City, CA

*Committee in formation. If you are interested in joining either committee, please contact Dr. Elliott Rabin at erabin@ravsak.org.

For sponsorship information please contact Marla Rottenstreich, Marketing Coordinator, at 646-496-7162 or marlar@ravsak.org
Religious Purposefulness in a Pluralistic Day School

Rabbi Marc Baker

PLURALISTIC Jewish education is both a new model of building Jewish community and a philosophical approach to educating Jews. In the face of deep religious, social and political divisions (including interdenominational ignorance and stereotyping) within Klal Yisrael, an intentionally pluralistic Jewish community does not reject different approaches to Jewish practice, beliefs, or denominational affiliation. Nor does it merely tolerate these differences; rather, it views these differences as strengths and learning opportunities. The cultivation of communal and individual religious purposefulness in a pluralistic school does not rely on the building of rigid intellectual, theological, and social boundaries that so often explicitly or implicitly characterize a particularistic Jewish school or community’s education of its youth. Instead, the awareness of and interactions with the Jewish “Other” contribute in essential ways to students’ religious identity development.

If pluralism as an organizing principle of Jewish community offers a new model for Klal Yisrael, pluralism as an educational philosophy responds in unique ways to what sociologists have identified as shifting notions of American Jewish identity. This context helps to illuminate the unique approach to religious purposefulness in a pluralistic school.2

In 2000, against the backdrop of Robert Putnam’s Bowling Alone (2000) and Wade Clark Roof’s Spiritual Marketplace (1999), Steven M. Cohen and Arnold Eisen’s The Jew Within paints a new picture of American Jewish identity that raises serious questions for Jewish education. In an attempt to capture the changing ways in which “moderately affiliated” Jewish Americans conceive of their own Judaism, Cohen and Eisen suggest that the “profound individualism” of American Jews is a serious concern for Jewish institutions and for Jewish educators striving to emphasize community and commitment to Jewish tradition and values. What does it mean to strengthen Jewish identities in a world where it might no longer be possible to define (or to prescribe) what a Jewish identity should look like? Whereas a traditional Jewish education can maintain clearly defined conceptions of “classical Jewish knowledge” and will continue to educate with a view toward traditional behavioral norms, most American Jews, Cohen and Eisen suggest, will not respond positively to an education that imposes such expectations from without.

The Jew Within, however, also raises the optimistic possibility that, if exposed to a range of options, American Jews on a quest to fashion their own identities will embrace that which Jewish institutions have to offer. Cohen and Eisen write, “[Jewish institutions] must have a range of options available to every individual at every moment, so that when he or she is ready to seize hold of Jewishness or Judaism, the right option is there to be had.”3

It is possible, they seem to suggest, that if Jewish educational institutions can reinvent themselves, placing Jewish tra-

1. I use the term “intentional” in contrast with what one might call a “pragmatic” pluralism, which might tolerate serving a diverse population due to circumstance, such as limited communal resources or a limited number of families committed to Jewish education.

2. Many of the ideas in this article are based on a paper that I wrote together with my colleague M. Evan Wolkenstein: “A New Jewish Education: The Philosophy and the Methodology of the New Jewish High School of Greater Boston through the lens of Interviews with 13 Graduating Seniors.”

ditions, practices, and values into the context of their own “spiritual marketplaces,” then they will speak directly and meaningfully to the “sovereign selves” of their student populations.

Jewish education today must compete in the marketplace of ideas and identities for our students’ minds, hearts and souls (let alone their attention!). A pluralistic Jewish school is in a unique position to promote religious purposefulness by engaging students (and often families too) in the creative process of personal identity construction while empowering students to develop into mature and confident self-defined Jews who will be able to find their way, even in a world of normative Jewish commitments.

While a pluralistic educational mission plays out in various ways in educational practice, I want to suggest two ways—corresponding broadly to curriculum and instruction—that a pluralistic Jewish high school can promote and educate toward the value of religious purposefulness.4

A Pluralistic Curriculum—Core Pillars of Jewish Identity

Contrary to popular misconception, pluralism does not mean that “anything goes.” A school should be explicit about its core pillars of Jewish identity—the non-negotiables, so to speak, with which it expects students to engage. These core pillars are broadly defined norms of practice and belief, within which there is room for a widely differentiated range of expressed commitment. A school needs to name these pillars and, for each pillar, to provide students with compelling and substantive learning experiences.

Two examples of these pillars might include sacred time (zman kodesh) and sacred text (Talmud Torah). A pluralistic school can expect students’ lives to beat to a Jewish rhythm and to be punctuated by, for example, an awareness and celebration of Shabbat and Jewish holidays. Similarly, a pluralistic school can expect that students’ Jewish identities involve a commitment to ongoing learning (albeit defined by a broad range of historical, cultural, and religious texts and ideas). Both of these pillars—sacred time and sacred text—create potential pathways toward meaningful Jewish living, invite students to take part in Judaism’s ongoing interpretive tradition, and are critical entryways to skills and knowledge that empower our students to be literate, self-confident participants in the Jewish community. Other core pillars of Jewish identity might include Kehillah and Klal.

What does it mean to strengthen Jewish identities in a world where it might no longer be possible to define (or to prescribe) what a Jewish identity should look like?

4. While I write broadly about pluralistic Jewish education (and am now a day school parent at a pluralistic elementary school), I am writing from the perspective of a Jewish high school educator. Given the developmental differences between elementary, middle, high school and post-high school students, it is important to distinguish which audience we are speaking about, especially when we focus on the development of Jewish identity. This article is based primarily on my experiences with high school-aged adolescents, formerly at The Weber School (Atlanta, GA) and now at Gann Academy (Waltham, MA).
The Challenge of Tradition and Openness in Tefillah

by Rabbi Aaron Frank

A fter working many years in various institutions in which davening takes place, I entered room 203 on my first day at Beth Tfiloh Dahan Community School in 2002 and I could not believe my ears. Tefillot that in other institutions were not taught until high school, if ever, were recited beautifully by fifth graders from families of all range of observance. From their faces, it seemed that they knew the words, they knew the tune and they knew the structure.

But what lies behind those faces? We all know that tefillah is a lifelong challenge. As Jewish educators, we try to accomplish a great deal with tefillah education. Just look at the list. We want our students to

- read difficult Hebrew words fluently
- read them in unison with their peers
- be familiar with the school’s tunes in order to participate in group tefillah
- understand the content of prayers by building skills of translation

Only after accomplishing these difficult tasks can one even begin to think about the primary goal: having tefillah be a wonderful experience that can connect us with our inner selves, our People and, of course, with G-d.

Here at Beth Tfiloh, this challenge takes on a unique form. On the one hand, our mission states that we are a school that is committed to “a modern approach to traditional Judaism.” This demands that we remain firmly steeped in the traditional liturgy and the goal of having children learn a wide range of tefillot. This makes our challenge one that is similar to those of traditional “yeshiva” day schools.

On the other hand, our mission is to “welcome children from a broad range of backgrounds and beliefs, recognizing and respecting the spiritual dignity of those beliefs.” In respecting the broad range of beliefs, our davening must make room for growth and development in the direction that the student chooses—ha’asher hu shan.

From our lower school through our middle school and in our high school, tefillah is structured in an age appropriate manner to achieve this precious balance. Lower school students all pray together, high school students have more choices. Yet a couple of critical challenges span the divisions:

A balance between relevance and substance—We constantly balance the need to make tefillah relevant to our students and our desire to ground Jewish prayer in an authentic experience of the breadth and structure of the siddur. “We find ourselves asking whether each of these is mutually exclusive,” writes Director of Education Zipora Schorr, “or whether they can coexist and even inform one another.” Whether it be in a 4th grade discussion about the wonders all around us or students grappling with the problem of evil in a high school tefillah class, we must be open to showing our students the application of prayer to contemporary daily life. We also must show fidelity to the structure of the siddur in demonstrating that the language of prayers can enhance the experiences of the everyday.

Options vs. optional—Our choices in high school with regard to davening are aimed at giving students the ability to explore prayer in their own way while still maintaining our school’s commitment to Halakhah. Tefillah is mandatory at Beth Tfiloh, but students may choose from a variety of options, including an all-female tefillah, a tefillah that emphasizes discussion and a traditional minyan. Choice ex-
You may never have heard of Gaucher Disease (pronounced “Go-Shay”). But it is found primarily in Jewish people of Ashkenazi descent. In fact, about one out of every 15 people within this group carries the Gaucher gene, a ratio far higher than Tay Sachs. It is not age or gender specific, and can affect anyone.

Gaucher warning signs include:
- Fatigue
- Nosebleeds and other bleeding problems
- Easy bruising
- Enlarged abdomen
- Bone pain and easily fractured bones
- Enlarged liver or spleen
- Low platelet count
- Anemia

Gaucher can be detected early with a blood test. Fortunately, effective treatments are available. The consequences of the disease can be debilitating, so don’t wait and wonder, get the facts now.

For additional information, testing and treatment, call toll-free: 1-877-788-0864

© 2008 National Gaucher Foundation

STUDENTS GIVE THE GIFT OF SIGHT TO ISRAELI BLIND

There are few things in life more feared than loss of vision and there is no known mobility aid for a blind person that is better than a guide dog.

Students are urged to help sponsor a puppy either as a class Tzedakah Project or as a Mitzvah Project for their Bar or Bat Mitzvah to assist blind Israeli veterans and civilians to regain their lives.

This humanitarian project combines puppies, helping the blind, a Jewish value — and makes an important connection to Israel.

To learn more, please contact us for a package of information including a poster and our new DVD entitled Partnership for Life.

ISRAEL GUIDE DOG CENTER FOR THE BLIND
732 S. Settlers Circle
Warrington, PA 18976

For further information:
Tel: 267-927-0205
E-mail: mike@israelguidedog.org
Internet: www.israelguidedog.org

Support Our Dogs’ Hebrew Education

So, give a blind Israeli a new life. You’ll see your own life in an entirely new way.

Israel Guide Dog Center for the Blind
Share Our Vision
This is no ordinary trip - this is you in Israel.
A journey you will never forget!

The Alexander Muss Institute for Israel Education (AMIEE) is dedicated to engaging teens and helping them discover, explore and embrace their connection to the heritage, culture, and land of Israel. For 36 years, the Alexander Muss Israel programs have excelled at preparing students for college and beyond. AMIIIE works together with day schools and community groups to customize their Israel experience bringing Israel’s living history into the hearts, minds and souls of all that attend.

Learn it! Live it! Love it!
Goals and Preparation for a Tefillah Policy

by Tzivia Garfinkel

When we examine our history, we learn that communal prayer developed to take the place of sacrifice after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70 C.E. An examination of the resulting siddur or prayerbook shows that it contains within it the essence of Jewish belief, practice, calendar, ideas—in fact, all that enables Judaism to be a portable religion. It is, therefore, a vital foundation of Jewish life. And educators who shape Jewish learning in inclusive community day schools that celebrate the diversity of Jewish life face the question of how to approach tefillah in a way that reflects their respect for the range of families present in their schools.

As with other areas of study, in relation to tefillah, we then consider three questions: What do we want students to learn? What do we want students to value? And, as a result of what they have learned and come to value, what do we want students to do?

These questions form the basis of conversations that take place with Jewish Studies faculty who have the profound responsibility to carry out the vision and to realize the goals. Absent the teachers’ deep understanding of their task, tefillah experiences throughout the grades will not reflect the school’s vision.

An interesting factor that inevitably has an impact on this process is that members of the Jewish Studies faculty represent a diverse Jewish community with a variety of backgrounds. This can be viewed as a challenge or as an opportunity because few teachers can imagine Judaism without the divisions with which they grew up, whether Sephardi or Ashkenazi, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, or Orthodox, American, Israeli, or another nationality. Rather than ignore these divisions, it can be valuable to capitalize on the framework the teachers bring to the table. A meaningful starting point for the teachers initially saw as a difficult teaching responsibility can become a source of pride and delight. They are then ready to work with the curriculum and to share tefillah experiences with their students.

Beginning in kindergarten, students in our school learn a core of tefillot—matbe’a shel tefillah—said routinely in daily and Shabbat services. Each year new tefillot are added to the first core tefillot, until the students have a solid foundation in the siddur. Teachers offer divrei tefillah to explore the structure of the siddur and ideas that are developmentally accessible. In upper grades, students are asked to prepare divrei tefillah or to respond to open-ended questions about tefillot. Nigunim are introduced to create a bridge from the classroom—”chol”—part of the day to...
A Siddur of Our Own

by Ray Levi, PhD

Tefillah stands at the heart of a Jewish day school program that nourishes religious purposefulness. Yet building meaningful and engaging curricula that both teach prayer and engage students in services remains one of our most elusive goals. The problem is compounded in community day schools that serve students representing a broad spectrum of Jewish practice. Using a denominationally based siddur can easily be interpreted by parents and community leaders as favoring one particular approach to prayer over another.

When this question was brought to the leadership of the Amos and Celia Heilicher Minneapolis Jewish Day School, we chose to view the challenge as an opportunity. In truth, we knew that the siddur we were using was not well-suited to younger students, not because it was movement based, but because it was not designed for children. We began asking some critical questions: What would make a siddur inviting to elementary students? How might a siddur enhance the study of specific tefillot and help students wrestle with the emerging understandings of prayer that they are formulating? What would a developmentally appropriate siddur look like?

A number of the clues needed to answer these questions were already apparent. Our youngest students were using “homemade siddurim” which they illustrated. In our limmud tefillah sessions, for all ages, students often illustrated their understandings of prayers they were learning, a practice that we know also enhances children’s comprehension of stories they read. Beautifully illustrated books are treasured by young students. Font and visual layout that is stimulating to the eye eases the decoding of words.

So we at the Heilicher Day School set out on the ambitious and rewarding task of designing a siddur that would enhance services and the religious experiences of students. The result is With All Your Heart—A Week Day Prayer Book, a siddur for elementary-school students now being used in many Jewish day schools, in which

- the arrangement of text on a page echoes the rhythm of the Hebrew prayers.
- colorful student illustrations suggest visual metaphors for children (and adults) to associate with individual tefillot.
- child-friendly, gender-neutral translations of prayers are provided to assist in comprehension.
- there is open space on pages to leave room for children’s own thoughts. The absence of clutter encourages reflection, which when juxtaposed with student art, fosters spiritual connections.

Designing a siddur that was developmentally appropriate also allowed us to create one that was non-denominational. The Gevurot prayer, for example, includes both the Conservative/Orthodox version and Reconstructionist/Reform ones. These options provide important teaching opportunities both to probe deeply about meaning and to value the diversity that is reflected in our student body.

The siddur also served as a springboard for another publishing project that grew out of parental requests to be more engaged when they joined Kabbalat Shabbat services at school. The strength of our community would clearly be enhanced if parents could comfortably integrate what children were learning about Shabbat rituals with family practice. With All Your Heart—A Shabbat and Festival Companion is designed to take what has been experienced at school into the home. Prayers, brachot, and songs are included—all again accompanied by colorful student illustrations. This volume also explains the history of Shabbat practices, describes variations in the ways in which Shabbat is celebrated, and includes questions for discussion at the Shabbat table. The book is a resource that builds the family-school partnership in helping to make religious practice accessible to children and their parents and in underscoring our deep commitment to religious purposefulness at our day school.

Ray Levi, PhD, head of school at the Amos and Celia Heilicher Minneapolis Jewish Day School, mentor for the Day School Leadership Training Institute (DSLTI), and member of the RAVSAK Executive Committee.
Like many community day schools that are committed to pluralism and a pluralist expression of Judaism, the San Diego Jewish Academy has historically struggled with tefillah. For some, tefillah should be an intrinsically Jewish activity that contributes to the Jewish vibrancy on campus. For others, tefillah is an intrinsically alienating activity that only contributes to the inherent discomfort with things that are “too Jewish.” In truth, many students were turned off from tefillah as it had been run. Opinions were divided among administrators and faculty; meetings at all levels of the school, including the board, exposed disagreements over how to handle this issue. Parents generally supported conducting tefillah in the school, but were troubled by negative reports from their children. The tension had become so palpable that there was discussion of getting rid of the two day per week tefillot sessions at our school.

This past year our administration returned to Jewish sources and tried to determine the reason for tefillah, for prayer, not only for a community but for an individual. Looking at teachings from Heschel, Steinsaltz, and the Baal Shem Tov, we reached a more spiritual understanding of tefillah that offered a starting point for a new approach in our school. Rather than speaking about and teaching tefillah as a chiyuv (obligation) and an intrinsic Jewish activity in which Jewish students should engage, we examined tefillah as one type of Jewish reflective activity. By finding a common language, “reflective time for the soul,” our administration realized that there is an inherent good for both faculty and student to learn to set aside time for Cheshbon HaNefesh. Now our task was to teach and sell this to the student body while maintaining our commitment to a pluralist community.

In a desire to stress the importance of communal reflective time, we created an environment conducive to that goal. Students made a choice to commit to a specific Cheshbon HaNefesh community. Middle school students chose from four communities reflective of our pluralistic community: Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and Learner. High School students could choose from those four communities and three others: fine art,
The Challenge of Tradition and Openness in Tefillah

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 22]

ists, but the engagement in prayer is not “optional.” We must be honest that to pray as a Jew is not an “if I feel like it” type of experience. Prayer is a responsibility, but within that commitment, there is room for different modes and structures of how we pray.

Probably more than any other area, prayer is the place where the challenge of capturing the nuance of Beth Tfiloh is most manifested. Are we structured? Yes. Are we flexible? Yes. To paraphrase my friend and teacher Tova Hartman, our goal here at Beth Tfiloh is not solely to dwell on tefillah, to understand its structure, its meaning and its role, but our end goal is, through our program and our passion, to have everyone, in her or his own way, have a life-long relationship with the siddur and with Hashem—to truly dwell in tefillah—for life.

Rabbi Aaron Frank is the Lower School Principal of the Beth Tfiloh Dahan Community School and lives with his wife and four children in Baltimore, Maryland.

From Minyan to Cheshbon HaNefesh

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 27]

music and poetry. These communities now meet twice per week, Monday and Thursday, and students not only look forward to this time but generally participate.

The three high school-only Cheshbon HaNefesh communities investigate and discuss a piece of liturgy on Mondays. Thursdays are set aside for students to express their understanding and connection to the liturgical piece via the chosen medium: art, music, or poetry. Over the course of a semester or a year, the students accumulate a portfolio of artistic work that reflects their ownership to the liturgy.

This Cheshbon HaNefesh program does not permit students to drop out of the tefillah activity. Rather, each student becomes part of a smaller community that relies upon each individual. Each individual contributes to the community’s ability to engage in the reflective process and examine the Jewish component of the individual and communal soul, all the while recognizing that each communal expression of the soul must be validated and recognized.

Rabbi Leslie Lipson is the Dean of Judaic Studies of San Diego Jewish Academy in San Diego, CA.
**Goals and Preparation for a Tefillah Policy**

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 25]

the tefillah—“kodesh”—part of the day.

Initially students learn tefillot orally, and then as they become readers, flip charts are added. Third grade students use a siddur developed by the Minneapolis Jewish Day School, a RAVSAK school, which they continue to use in fourth grade. Fifth graders are introduced to Siddur Sim Shalom, chosen since the majority of families are affiliated with a Conservative congregation. Fifth graders also have a shabbaton in which they create a full Shabbat experience for themselves, from Kabbalat Shabbat through Havdalah. In sixth grade, students encounter a different siddur each term—Artscroll, Gates of Prayer, Sim Shalom—and explore their similarities and differences. This practice prepares them to go to each other’s bnai mitzvah in Orthodox, Reform, and Conservative synagogues. Different tunes are introduced through the years, so students become familiar with Sephardic and Ashkenazi traditions. And in the eighth grade before students visit Israel on their class tiyul, they become familiar with the Rinat Yisrael siddur and the Koren Shabbat siddur. Throughout the grades, students lead class tefillah services which are egalitarian. And, as for G-d . . . G-d is found in the divergent tefillah and flows in and out of tefillah study and conversation.

So, to answer the three questions: What do we want students to learn? We want students to learn to participate in and lead tefillah services and to understand the ideas embedded in the siddur. What do we want students to value? We want students to value praying as members of a community, and to recognize that there are a variety of different Jewish communities where they may find a home. What do we want students to do? We hope that students will find joy and meaning in tefillah as they move into their independent Jewish lives.

**School as Shul: Day Schools in the Religious Lives of Parents**

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 15]

mine who in the faculty has the skills to connect with parents in respectful and effective fashion. Most school professionals took up their work because they enjoy working with children. Some are uncomfortable when it comes to working with adults, as is often evident on parent-teacher nights when the most competent teachers can suddenly seem horribly awkward. Schools, then, must figure out who in their faculty will service parents’ needs for connection, learning and inspiration, and how they will go about doing so in ways that are not patronizing or prescriptive.

These are not comfortable or everyday kinds of questions to consider. In fact, they are the kinds of questions that call for great clarity concerning a school’s Jewish purpose in relation to children and their families. One might say that they constitute what is truly the bottom-line of day school education.

**Response to Berger, by Barry W. Holtz**

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12]

fashion. Our Judaism and our selves are bound up with one another in ways that are messier and subtler than the dichotomy of “self” and “Judaism” might suggest.

These emendations do not, I believe, undercut the important challenge that Berger puts before the day school community: Developing schools dedicated both to content and commitment is our best hope for affecting the lives of children and building a Jewish future. It is towards that end that we must dedicate our efforts.

Barry W. Holtz is dean of the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education at the Jewish Theological Seminary where he is also the Seminary’s Theodore and Florence Baumrwitter Professor of Jewish Education.

**Response to Berger, by Rabbi Aaron Panken, Ph.D.**

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9]

from whom Judaism will emanate to the natural community around it. Instead, day schools should seek to create as many radically different Jewish “nodes” as possible: talented, thoughtful, self-reflective Jews who can express extremely diverse viewpoints, respect and debate with opposing opinions, and work to mediate differences to create a coherent yet flexible, open-source “network Judaism” that will meet the needs of generations to come. These “nodes” can add to the “nodes” created by Jewish camping and seminaries, by religious schools and Israel trips, by adult learning and familial practice, to form and re-form a Judaism that can stay in touch with the times even as it honors our inherited legacy of sacred texts and traditions. This is, to me, the way that Judaism will continue the unending cycle of evolution that has kept it fresh, responsive, and creative for nearly three millennia. This is the sort of approach that will sustain the generations to come as they search for their own modes of commitment, conversation, and community to build and extend the Jewish tradition in new and exciting ways.

Rabbi Aaron Panken, Ph.D. teaches Rabbinic Literature and serves as Vice President for Strategic Initiatives at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.
Jewish Identities in Process: Religious Purposefulness in a Pluralistic Day School

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 21]

Tsirael (community and peoplehood), Eretz Tsirael uMedinet Tsirael (Zionism and the Land of Israel), Mussar uMitzvot (Jewish Values, Ethics and Commandments), Ruchaniut (Jewish spirituality).

The idea of core pillars of Jewish identity implies that while educational success in a pluralistic school will include a wide range of student choices regarding how certain communal norms will play out in their lives, whether these norms should play a role in their lives is not up for debate. Non-engagement with this „subject matter” is not an option that is consistent with the religious or Jewish educational mission of the school.

Student Learning as Process — E2C2

Student learning in a pluralistic context can be explained as a process of Jewish identity development that cultivates four essential habits of mind and heart: Exposure, Engagement, Commitment, and Construction (E2C2).

A pluralist high school aims to expose students to a broad range of models of Jewish identity — different approaches to the core pillars, including both the local Chabad rabbi as well as a leader of The Workman’s Circle (committed to secular-cultural Judaism). Exposure makes students aware of the diversity of expressions of Jewish living, practice, and belief that have always existed and continue to exist within the Jewish People. This serves the dual purpose of broadening students’ horizons by opening their minds and hearts to Others of which they might not be aware, as well as creating options (a “spiritual marketplace”) by expanding the possibilities for student engagement and possible entryways into Jewish learning and meaningful Jewish identity.

Once a student gains exposure, the student must take seriously the responsibility to engage, and the school must teach students how to do so. Engagement defines a process of interaction — a hermeneutic, if you will — with which a student approaches texts, people, opinions, ideas. Pluralism demands an interpersonal ethic of engaging the Other with critical openness. To engage implies a willingness to take seriously the claim that this Other might make on me; it means taking the dual purpose of broadening students’ horizons by opening their minds and hearts to Others of which they might not be aware, as well as creating options (a “spiritual marketplace”) by expanding the possibilities for student engagement and possible entryways into Jewish learning and meaningful Jewish identity.

Jewish education today must compete in the marketplace of ideas and identities for our students’ minds, hearts and souls.

A school should be explicit about its core pillars of Jewish identity — the non-negotiables, so to speak, with which it expects students to engage.

But religious purposefulness in pluralistic Jewish education cannot stop at exposure and engagement. While the school does not mandate one set of behavioral outcomes, it does expect students to commit — to make choices and to take stands about what they believe and how they want to live their Jewish lives. Before a Shabbaton, for example, students might be expected to discuss and decide how they will celebrate and observe Shabbat together in light of the diversity of experiences, backgrounds and practices regarding Shabbat. This gives students the opportunity to ask themselves how they feel, what they think and believe about Shabbat, as well as to voice their beliefs and their feelings to their peers. Creating opportunities for students not only to discuss and explore, but also to commit, makes clear the school’s expectation that learning is not merely an intellectual exercise; exploring and engaging translate into belief and practice, which shape personal Jewish identity.

The totality of a student’s exposure, engagement, and commitment results in a process of construction that captures the holistic nature of religious purposefulness and Jewish identity development in a pluralistic high school. Teachers should expect students to go beyond taking a stand.
on particular issues, practices, or beliefs; students also must reflect on how one choice or commitment fits into their overall Jewish identities. Response papers in Jewish Studies classes, for example, might ask students to reflect on how the ideas they are learning play might play out in their own lives. In an informal conversation on a Shabbaton, a teacher might ask a student who chooses not to observe Shabbat in a traditional way to reflect on what his choice indicates about the role that Halakhah or Jewish community plays in his life. The move from commitment to construction begins to shape the totality of a student’s Jewish identity, which in turn shapes the lens through which he continues to explore, engage, and commit, in high school and beyond.

Conclusion
In a school that presents one set of acceptable norms and beliefs, students have two options for their Jewish lives: acceptance or rejection. In a pluralistic high school, encounters with diverse experiences, ideas, and people, and the acceptance and rejection of norms and values from across the spectrum of Jewish life become regular parts of a student’s high school experience. Rather than a “take-it or leave-it” approach, this process of critical examination and conscious choice constitutes, for each individual student, the continual construction of his or her own personal Jewish identity.

One may not write off a rabbinic argument because “those guys” wrote it “back then”

Students in a pluralistic school are in a process of self-definition and redefinition in dialogue with Jewish texts, tradition, history, family, values, and thought. The nature of this dialogue may change, depending on many factors, including the age and maturity of the student, as well as the Jewish commitments of the student’s family and community. For some students, the voices of Jewish law and tradition may challenge the voices of self and sometimes family as well. For others, the voice of self might challenge the voices of tradition and community. What is most important is that students maintain a vibrant dialogue that seeks to respect, hear, and understand all of these voices as they learn and grow.

Yes, the process of identity construction and the inability to predict particular outcomes for any particular student can be scary, especially for those of us who hope deeply that our students will emerge with Jewish identities that we deem religiously purposeful. But those of us who believe in pluralistic Jewish education must have faith that the beauty of religious purposefulness is found, in fact, in the process itself.

RAVSAK Membership - Join Now

As the new school year begins, so does another year at RAVSAK. This year we mark our 22nd year of providing guidance, resources, professional and lay development and overall support to Jewish community day schools. What began as a grassroots organization has grown into the largest day school network for pluralistic day schools in North America.

RAVSAK offers a number of tangible benefits to its members: free job posting services; an annual leadership conference; resource and data collection; a national listing of member schools; advocacy and representation on the regional and national levels; HaYidion, a quarterly journal; accreditation services and support; curriculum consultation; board training; Project SuLaM, Project ROPE, Moot Beit Din, and other programs; as well as list-serves for professionals and lay leaders.

We also offer board retreats, teacher-in-service trainings, Head of School placement services, website development, and Judaic accreditation.

Of course, RAVSAK also provides an extensive list of intangible benefits: aligning your school with the fastest growing, most dynamic network of schools; guidance in the difficult issues of Jewish pluralism; a community of practice of leading educators and lay leaders dedicated to serving the broadest scope of the Jewish people.

Mark your calendars now for our 22nd Annual Leadership Conference to be held in San Francisco on January 18-20, 2009. The High School Network and PARDeS (Progressive Association of Reform Day Schools) will be joining us again this year. You can register for the conference and hotel by visiting www.ravsak.org. Early bird registration is open until December 8, 2008.

In order to receive and take advantage of all the benefits RAVSAK has to offer, your school must be current in its dues payment. Please take a few moments to update your membership on line by visiting www.ravsak.org and clicking on the red school login button. You should use the id and password assigned to your school. If you have any questions regarding this information, please call the RAVSAK office at 212-665-1320.

Wishing all of you and your families a shanah tovah umetukah,

Robin Feldman
Director of Member Services
Teaching Mitzvot: Challenges, Opportunities, and Questions

Interview with Rabbi Achiya Delouya

In each issue of HaYidion, the editors interview someone with particular expertise or experience in a topic related to the issue’s theme.

How does your school teach about mitzvot to a student body with a high diversity of practices and perspectives on Judaism?

Generally we teach early sources first, particularly from Tanakh, making a distinction between law and custom. For the most part, our curriculum follows the calendar regarding the festivals, fasts and minor holidays. In the middle school we delve into later sources, from the Talmud to modern rabbis; we also teach Jewish perspectives on contemporary topics such as medical or business issues. At all times, whenever the text differs from modern practices (for Conservative, Reform, or Sephardic application of a particular law), we tell students to ask their rabbi how a mitzvah should be performed.

Does denominational pluralism factor into the way that mitzvot are discussed?

We do not make an attempt to cover all denominations when teaching. Importance is given for skill in decoding a text (Hebrew), understanding other possible readings, and staying close to the peshat (literal level). Elementary education gives too little room for critical or abstract thinking due to age, maturity, and brain development. At the middle school level, children understand more critically the nuances of Halakhah and mitzvot, and discussions occur more freely at that level.

To what degree does your school emphasize the performance of mitzvot as essential to Judaism?

Any learning to have relevance and meaning needs to be action oriented. The performance of mitzvot are taught as essential to the development of character (middot), development of Jewish identity (haskalah) and Jewish living (Halakhah).

Certainly a person’s character needs constant reminders and daily application in order for traits such as sharing, respectful language, being thankful to Hashem and others, being aware of a classmate’s or other students’ needs (among many) to be absorbed and ingrained.

Tell us about some of the main challenges you’ve experienced in educating about mitzvot.

The challenges are those of meaning and relevance. How can what we teach make an impact on those young lives today and in the future? How to bring the wisdom of our Torah and Sages into the 21st century? These are constant questions we address, given the nature of our multifaceted families, the various affiliations, etc. What is the base level of mitzvot that, no matter the level of observance, we can teach to support the practice of Judaism among our families? That, I believe, is the biggest challenge we have.

What kinds of reactions have you received from parents regarding their children learning mitzvot?

There is somewhat of a dichotomy between what is taught at school and home life. This is true even for secular subjects such as physics and geometry. Parents may not have recall of those subjects, or they may have learned in a different way than we do today. The same applies for the learning of mitzvot.

The difference is that Judaics classes have the capacity to have a much greater impact on the lives of the students and their families. I think parents send their child to a Jewish day school precisely because we offer a unique approach to learning. This approach includes Jewish practices and norms of proper behavior. Research shows clearly that parents want their children learning ethical and moral behaviors. Parents who send their children

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 34]
RAVSAK
Jewish High School Network

Moot Beit Din

April 23-26, 2009
29 Nisan – 2 Iyar 5769
Denver, Colorado

Registration deadline:
November 7, 2008

For more information or to register, please contact Dr. Elliott Rabin
212-665-1320 x302
erabin@ravsak.org

What is the Moot Beit Din?
The Moot Beit Din, a project of the RAVSAK Jewish High School Network, brings student teams from across North America together for a Shabbaton of creative halachic thinking, inspirational learning, and social networking with peers.

School-based teams form their own "beit din," working throughout the winter to prepare a case for presentation before a panel of judges. Student teams collaborate and compete, bringing to life their knowledge of Jewish law while meeting teens from Jewish high schools in the US and Canada.

Where?
Our host for the 2009/5769 Moot Beit Din is Herzl/RMHA at the Denver Campus for Jewish Education in Denver, Colorado.

When?
Thursday, April 23 – Sunday, April 26, 2009.

Who?
Participation is open to schools affiliated with the RAVSAK Jewish High School Network. Teams of 4 students (grades 9-12 only) and 1 faculty advisor are invited to attend the competition.

Register your school now!
to our schools believe that the Torah has an important message to us all. We see that while our generation is more affluent, with access to more possessions and more knowledge, human nature has not changed much, and that existential questions about the meaning of life are still very important. So while we may at times debate about the importance of learning certain mitzvot over others, one thing remains: Will my child have a sense of belonging, will he or she behave in an honorable manner and follow in the paths of Jewish wisdom?

What kind of role(s) has your board played in setting policy or responding to issues on this topic?

Our board does not set policy regarding curricular issues.

Discussions and guidelines may come at times to address issues of Jewish diversity at school, allowing many voices to be heard and practices to be observed. The main emphasis is to consider the need of the whole school versus individual needs: for example, how to make sure Orthodox children feel the same sense of belonging as children of different affiliations or with no affiliation. One example concerns school prayer: how can we have various forms of prayer and still respect divergences of practice? We opted for a boys-only and girls-only morning prayers. Each can then lead their own group without making either boys or girls uncomfortable.

How does your school build mitzvot into your curriculum?

We have adopted some existing curricula to make sure that as they get older, students study mitzvot at an increasing level of depth and complexity.

In what ways do activities outside of the classroom include the performance of mitzvot?

Our students visit the Home for the Aged next door to us, giving us ample opportunities for face-to-face encounter in acts of chesed. Our Student Council selects various Jewish and non-Jewish organizations for tzedakah and involves our students in fundraising for them. Children do have to demonstrate they practice certain mitzvot at home, and parents are involved as well.

From your observation of various community day schools, what changes would you like to see in this regard?

In discussion with some of my colleagues, we see how imperative it is to stay centered on what is common to us all as a learning community. We all face the same eternal questions in running Jewish schools:

Is it what students know that matters or how they know and live?

How can we teach mitzvot in such a way that brings to mind, heart, and soul the sanctity of life?

What sets of behavior will make our next generation more compassionate and equipped with good basic skills for conflict resolution? What role does the Torah, the study of mitzvot play in this regard?

What advice do you have specifically for school heads?

In good Jewish fashion, I would challenge them with a question:

In making a decision, ask yourselves if this is the right thing to do, or the wise thing to do?

You may make a decision that you believe is right, but may not be wise, creating dissension in your school.

On crucial policies regarding mitzvot in your school, whether concerning wearing kippot, conducting tefillot, erecting a mechitzah, or preparing a Judaics curriculum, you may need to consult with people in your school and community in order to find consensus and achieve maximal buy-in. It is essential for you to show strong leadership and to consult with others wisely and strategically for the community to support the values and direction of the school.

Chazak ve-ematz—Be strong and of good courage!
Participants in Project SuLaM completed their first year of the program with a rich, rewarding 12-day institute held at the Jewish Theological Seminary this summer. The institute was the culmination of an intensive year of study and growth, both personal and professional. SuLaMites had studied the previous summer in an immersion program in Jewish life and learning. They devised Individual Action Plans (IAPs) to set goals for impacting their schools that could be measured and sustained throughout the year. They studied a fixed curriculum in the fall, then formulated their own learning project for the spring. Include a winter learning Shabbaton and monthly mentoring sessions—they all add up to a transformative journey on the part of courageous participants.

Now the SuLaMites enter Phase 2 of the program, in which they work closely with colleagues from their school, both lay and professional, on a plan to create meaningful change in the Jewish profile and curriculum of the school. Through two Shabbatonim, site visits, and continued learning and mentoring, the SuLaM participants transform their personal growth into a vision for the growth of their school. Mazel tov on to all participants who successfully completed Phase 1 of SuLaM!

We are now recruiting participants for Cohort 3 of SuLaM. For information, contact Dr. Marc N. Kramer at mkramer@ravSAK.org.
Born and raised as a Chabad woman, I knew that I would live in a city where I would work to bring Judaism to Jewish people who wished to learn about their heritage. I never dreamed that I would be head of school at a community day school, governed by a community-represented board. I did not move to Charlotte, North Carolina, for a career in education. I came with my husband to open a religious educational center for Jews of all ages in the Carolinas. I was never concerned about being able to meet the needs of a diverse group of students with varied practices and beliefs, but I was totally unprepared to operate in a politically driven atmosphere.

I always knew that when one taught what one believed to be truth, with complete sincerity, understanding, and sensitivity, the message would be well received. I was taught that standing tall with the Torah’s teachings, even when I would feel like I was an anomaly, was the only way to educate. Eventually my experience validated my theory.

But I still heard people say: “I’m afraid your school is too Jewish.” “How could you teach ‘that’ in your school?” “Aren’t you going to lose your students who attend the Reform synagogue?” “We need to adjust our curriculum so that we don’t offend the student who is not observant.”

Hmmm. Some of what they say makes sense. If we teach a strong belief in G-d, we might offend those that would rather see Jewish teachings as a suggestion. If we ask the boys to wear kippot and do not demand that the girls wear them, too, do we meet the needs of those with an egalitarian preference? If we teach the children that the Torah demands that Jewish people be buried and not cremated, will we hurt the feelings of families who do not choose to observe this commandment?

We all deal with this dilemma. Every day.

So what do I do? Since the prime mission for our school is to teach Judaism, which consists of the Torah and its mitzvot, and, since our goal is to provide a sense of history and heritage for our students, I looked to the Torah for guidance on this issue.

This is what I found: There are three places where our Sages have pointed out how the Torah mandates the responsibility of the educator. This is in addition to the overarching commandment to teach our children Torah, as written in Deuteronomy and recited daily in the Shema. The first is in Leviticus 17, where we are prohibited from eating blood; the second is in Leviticus 22, where we are forbidden to eat insects; and the third is in Leviticus 21, where we are introduced to the importance of ritual purity among the priests. From the written text of these three commandments our Sages learned that “the elders are instructed to teach the youngsters” regarding their laws and application.

It seems to me, and probably to you, that out of all the mitzvot and narratives found in the Torah, the above three commandments do not appear to be relevant to educating our children.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe, of blessed memory, claims otherwise. He proposes that the message is that even when we believe that we couldn’t possibly succeed, that others would never go for it, or that we might even lose our jobs because of these beliefs, we should still go forward and teach what we know to be the “truth,” even if it is not the popular truth or the “in” truth, or what others want to hear.

How does he come to this conclusion? Because these three laws represent three mitzvot that one might believe would be futile to teach. Why are these mitzvot futile? Well, believe it or not, in biblical times, blood was considered a delicacy. Forbidding the consumption of blood at that time would be like forbidding a hamburger or hot dog in our days. Eating insects, one would think, is disgusting and repulsive. If one were already eating insects and were not repulsed by them, then you can assume that it would have been futile to convince him otherwise. Finally, the laws of ritual impurity are not considered rational laws, and choosing this mitzvah to transmit to children denies us the opportunity to also give them an explanation of the law. The laws of purity are classified as chukim—a category of statutes that go beyond conventional logic and cannot be explained.

There is no reason given in [CONTINUED ON PAGE 41]
10 Ways to Kick Off the School Year with PEJE!

Apply to purchase the Jewish Day School Parent Survey by September 10.

Attend the Strategic Financial Management Tool (SFMT) webinar on September 9 so that a team from your school can purchase SFMT software and attend a training in Los Angeles (Sept. 22), Miami (Oct. 27), or Chicago (Oct. 29).

Make sure your school’s Admission Director knows how the Admission Tracking Tool can help you measure the ways to grow your enrollment.

Email LeadershipLine@peje.org for a no-cost one-hour consultation with a PEJE Coach.

Mark your calendar for workshops on “Getting the Right People on Your Board” November 16 in New York/New Jersey or January 11 in Los Angeles.

Invite your school’s new board members (and continuing ones!) to join the PEJE Leadership Community of Practice so they can network and learn with board members from across North America.

Reconnect with colleagues around Admission, Development, Diverse Learners, Financial Management, Israel Engagement, Leadership, or Professional Development in one of the PEJE Communities of Practice.

Visit peje.org to browse the latest resources in knowledge areas like Admission, Financial Management, Fundraising, and Governance.

Share your reflections on PEJE Assembly sessions or view session handouts on peje.wikispaces.com.

Subscribe your new staff and board members to PEJE’s monthly enewsletter, Hadashot V’Hidushim.

88 Broad Street • 6th Floor • Boston, MA 02110 • Phone 617.367.0001 • www.peje.org
Project ROPE Launches in Five Schools

Project ROPE: Roots of Philanthropy Education has begun its pilot year, with over a hundred students participating in five schools:

- Donna Klein Jewish Academy (Boca Raton)
- Gray Academy of Jewish Education (Winnipeg)
- Herzl/RMHA at the Denver Campus
- Hyman Brand Hebrew Academy (Kansas City)
- Jess Schwartz College Prep (Phoenix)

Project ROPE will give high school students at RAVSAK schools the skills, tools, Jewish lens and experience to become lifelong learners, doers and givers. There are three core goals of Project ROPE: to teach teens the Jewish roots, values and imperatives of philanthropic giving; to give them an understanding of fundraising fundamentals including the grantmaking process and effective philanthropic methods; and to provide them with the hands-on learning experience of running a fundraising campaign for a cause of their choice and responsibly allocating the funds raised.

As a direct result of Project ROPE, participating students will

- Understand how and why Jewish tradition has mandated philanthropic giving for thousands of years and what the implications are for us today
- Develop a basic knowledge of, and a desire to engage in, effective methods of philanthropy
- Experience the job of working collaboratively with fellow Jewish teens to identify and support causes of their choice

In Project ROPE, students study Jewish texts that discuss the communal and individual obligations of tzedakah. In consultation with their school administration and with local professionals, they carry out fundraising for the program. They learn the scope and complexities of social issues, and investigate the ways that nonprofits function, address contemporary problems, and provide services to people in need. They examine organizations both in their locality and in Israel, request proposals for grants, and make mature decisions about worthy causes and the efficient use of funds. Finally, they teach the school community as a whole about the issues that they study, and their efforts raise the school’s profile within their community.

Project ROPE is funded in part by a grant from the Jewish Teen Funders Network.

If your school would like more information about Project ROPE or is considering participating next year, contact Elliott Rabin at erabin@ravsak.org.

Make a Donation to RAVSAK

RAVSAK: The Jewish Community Day School Network is a non-profit entity, organized under IRS Code 501 (c)(3). In order to provide outstanding support and leadership to Jewish community day schools and the over 30,000 children they serve, we rely on the generosity of those dedicated to the future of the Jewish People.

Charitable contributions to RAVSAK are tax deductible to the fullest extent of the law. All donations to RAVSAK are acknowledged with a Donor Recognition card.

Please contact our National Office, visit www.ravsak.org and click the “Support us” button, or simply send your check made payable to RAVSAK to:

RAVSAK: The Jewish Community Day School Network
120 West 97th Street
New York, NY 10025
JUST BECAUSE YOUR STUDENTS ARE TOO YOUNG TO VOTE, DOESN’T MEAN THEY CAN’T ADD THEIR 2 CENTS!

BBYO, the world’s leading pluralistic Jewish teen movement, has teamed up with several youth empowerment organizations including Youth Service America, Do Something, Youth Noise and Mobilize.org to inspire teens not old enough to vote to make their voices heard in the 2008 Presidential Election.

Through MY2CENTSFORCHANGE.ORG your students can:

Share their 2 cents on the issues (from war to health care, education to the environment) with the Presidential Candidates.

See what other teens from around the country are saying about the issues.

Learn more about the 2008 Presidential Candidates and why teens should care.

Explore opportunities to get further involved through partner organizations.

Become inspired to take their involvement to the next level through in-school discussion and issues-related advocacy and community organizing.

Join educators around the country who have brought MyTwoCentsForChange into their classroom. Share a fun, interactive MyTwoCents curriculum with your students before the November election.

We have several programmatic and promotional resources available at no cost that can be found at www.BBYO.ORG/MY2CENTS or by contacting Sarah Shapiro at SARAH@MY2CENTSFORCHANGE.ORG or 202.857.6691.

“My2CentsForChange.org empowers students by allowing them to make their voices heard, while at the same time, helping them understand the issues and implications of the campaign and government policy. I think the resource is a worthwhile site for all grade levels, and I highly encourage its use in school as well as in a home setting.”

— Michael Hutchinson, Social Studies Teacher, Lincoln High School, Vincennes, Indiana
RAVSAK invites you to apply for a life and career changing professional development opportunity - **Project SuLaM: Study, Leadership and Mentoring**.

This unique, full-funded program is designed for professional day school leaders who are established educators yet to have a meaningful Judaic studies experience of their own.

Project SuLaM also provides the unusual opportunity for more Judaically knowledgeable heads to serve as mentors.

Limited to 18 participants and 5 mentors from North American Jewish day schools of all affiliations, Project SuLaM empowers heads and other key administrators to more deeply engage in and advocate for the Jewish life of the schools they lead.

Participants earn a generous honorarium and support future Judaic professional development. Schools have the opportunity to receive support for Judaic change projects.

For more information, please contact Dr. Marc N. Kramer at mkramer@ravsak.org or 212-665-1320.

Project SuLaM is funded by AVI CHAI.
Remember to Light a Fire

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 36]

the Torah for *chukim*. We simply observe them because G-d said so. The mitzvah of purity defies logic. To transmit and teach such a mitzvah seems futile, because we do not have the tools with which to convince, persuade, or influence our students.

Yet it is only in these three mitzvot that our Sages learn, “The elders are instructed to teach the youngsters.”

So what can we learn from the fact that the Torah chose these three mitzvot to instruct us on how to educate our students?

The Rebbe explains that the Torah tells us that Jewish education does not work only because we are good instructors. Nor does it work just because we are teaching what happens to appeal to the culture, society, or fad of the day. Our teaching is effective because we are telling the truth. Children are the best barometer for sincerity, straightforwardness, and truth. A truth is true, regardless of where society stands and regardless of where you and I stand.

In order for all the wonderful experiences, studies, and lessons to actually touch our students in such a way that they will be inspired to go on to represent the Jewish people, the Jewish family, and the Jewish past, with determination, strength, and confidence, we must convey the soul, the light, and the truth contained in our Jewish instruction. If we choose to leave out the truth and soul of the Torah they will be confused by this omission and will wonder why we are allowing political correctness to deny them the “meat” of Judaism.

In the early years of our school, I was challenged by this very topic. I was teaching the mitzvah of kashrut enthusiastically, describing the different signs of animals, fish, etc. that were needed in order to render the food we were eating as kosher. I looked up and saw an eight-year-old boy raising his hand. “Mariashi, do you have to keep kosher?” Oh, no, I was in trouble. What was I going to say? I could say, “Yes, you do have to keep kosher. The Torah says so.” But I would get in “political” trouble if I said that. Or, I could say, “No, you don’t have to. Judaism is a choice and you can decide if you want to or not.” But I couldn’t do that, because I didn’t believe that to be true. I first tried an evasive answer and said, “It’s a very big mitzvah to keep kosher.” He wasn’t satisfied and continued, “I didn’t ask that. I asked if you have to keep kosher.” “Benjamin,” I said. “Have you ever looked in your pantry and noticed products with a kosher symbol on them?” Of course, he had some items such as ketchup, Cheerios, etc. With a relieved smile, he said, “Yeah, we do. I guess I’m doing the mitzvah after all!”

I would like to conclude with a parable. There was a young man who wanted to become a blacksmith. He spent several weeks training with a master blacksmith, watching everything and taking notes. When the young man felt that he was fully trained and ready to go out on his own, he returned to his hometown to start his own business. But try as he might, he could not produce a single item. All of his banging was in vain.

It was only when he went back to his master that he realized that there was one important step he left out because he did not see it happen, and it was so basic that the blacksmith never mentioned it. He forgot to light the fire to heat the irons to bend the metal.

I leave you with a mandate and a reminder: Don’t forget to light the fire.

I was taught that standing tall with the Torah’s teachings, even when I would feel like I was an anomaly, was the only way to educate.

*...*
This was the third time she had been kicked out of minyan. She was told that she could not return unless she received my permission. Defiant, and angry, she confronted me. “Why do they make me pray in this school? What’s the point? I don’t believe in any of this!” From her perspective, this was the first time I had ever heard these challenges. Her mixture of anger and arrogance bordered on disrespect, so I first responded, “If you want something from me, do you think the tone you’re using is the way to get it, or do you want to start over?” She apologized, and then asked the same question in a softer voice.

“Because,” I answered, “I care more about you than you do. I know that this feels like a meaningless burden now, but you never know when knowing how to pray will be important to you. I don’t know, God forbid, you lose someone close to you, and you decide to go to shul, but no one bothered to show you how to navigate the siddur, and then you would blame me for not teaching you something so basic.” One can argue that it is our job to provide perspective and leadership to those who have difficulty seeing beyond tomorrow. Even though this little speech mollified her for the moment, I would be deluded to think that the rest of her high school career would see her davening with fervor, or even behaving appropriately in minyan. My response may have been clever, but ultimately, not wise.

For this student and many like her, being Jewish is perceived as being abnormal, something that is abhorrent to adolescent identity. It is the challenge of a Jewish day school to transform that feeling of being abnormal to being special. This was not going to be achieved for her through morning prayers, but it is our responsibility to find gateways for identity which are not only quintessentially Jewish, but are resonant with a sense of being part of a special community.

More often these days we have students who are not synagogue affiliated, and even if they are, their families do not see the synagogue as their primary affiliation. Once, at a meeting, I was asked how many of my students are unaffiliated. I answered, “Zero, but we do have many students for whom their primary affiliation is our school.” These include families for whom Medinat Yisrael is important, grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, families from Israel, and self-described cultural Jews who may not fall neatly into any of these categories. I don’t believe that the vast majority of our students identify strongly with a particular denomination, or that this will ever be important to them. More parents are sending their children to day school who do not belong to a synagogue for large portions of their lives.

They may belong to AIPAC or the JCRC, or take classes of Jewish interest, or participate in informal minyanim in their neighborhood, or practice certain Jewish rituals at home. As I’m writing, new gateways of affiliation are being created for those who feel strong Jewish connections, but connect through a very specific passion that is not answered through membership in a particular organization. For them, a day school provides the means for circumventing the synagogue route and being independent while still being connected. Often, the students who mark the second generation of anti-daveners have the greatest need for realizing their Jewish potential in ways that do not contradict their upbringing.

It is no accident that the easiest celebrations for a community day school are Yom HaAtzmaut and Yom Hashoah. Hitler didn’t distinguish between Jews, and virtually all the Jews we serve have a stake in Medinat Yisrael. It is also no accident that what was once called social action but now has been given the inaccurate moniker Tikkun Olam also affords many of our students a positive pathway toward feeling part of something larger that is quite wonderful and exemplary. These events offer moments where students celebrate being part of a particular community and feel kinship with a world that is specifically theirs but well beyond their individual concerns. The success of these events is instructive. The provision of opportunities like these have to be part of daily life at school, and davening alone cannot be relied upon to provide them.
It is up to the school to introduce Jewish ideas, Jewish rituals and practices that inform, resonate, challenge and provoke, not offend, but provoke our students. If we say “We care about the world too!” or “We’re environmentalists too!” we’re irrelevant and we are not needed. We have to demonstrate the “whats” and “whys” of our tradition through the same unique rigor that makes our tradition so special.

Giving something a Jewish label does not make it Jewish, but giving an idea unique Jewish understanding does. To learn that the word “shalom” is a name of God and therefore one cannot say Mah shalomcha (How is your shalom, a common greeting in ancient and modern Hebrew) in a polluted place teaches that the earth has to be untainted in order for God to dwell in it, for the holy is part of mundane personal encounters and the environment must be prepared for it. We don’t believe necessarily in the intrinsic holiness of the earth, but we certainly believe the earth must be unpolluted in order for holiness to dwell there. Such a lesson requires looking up the verse that demonstrates that shalom is a name of God and seeing how that is ascertained. Then one must see the connection between greeting and the name of God and then extrapolate that the earth only has this potential if it has been cared for properly. This brings the point home for those who need to know that these concerns are not only modern ones, but deeply and particularly Jewish ones.

When students returning from Birthright Israel were interviewed, the vast majority of them were self-defined as cultural Jews, but the first Jewish event they went to upon their return was Friday night services at Hillel. They had connected to Israel, but back here they went to the only Jewish place they knew. Even though enthusiasm for the synagogue may be on the wane, we cannot rely on davening in the school as the primary gateway for meaning for the vast majority of our students. The classroom, along with special celebrations, will be the environment where we connect our diverse traditions of learning with the passions of the individual student. Once that connection is made, we must articulate the necessity for respecting everyone’s unique, deep connection, for ultimately we share the goal of peoplehood. They will be taught not tolerance, but reverence for all aspects of Jewish life, including davening. They may not be inspired by it, but they will see its value and be respectful because they have found their place within and not without the community.

I should have answered my recalcitrant student that our school provides many gateways of meaning, so that you can find the path most meaningful to you. It may not be davening now, but it may be later. Your job is to know what we have so that you can connect deeply and profoundly to a tradition and a community that offers more opportunities than you can begin to know. For we know that as much as you may like a good time, it’s the meaningful moments that are most memorable. We provide not only what we think you need to know, but we are here to help you discover how this thing called being Jewish will make you feel truly special.

We’re looking for a few good schools! Thanks to a generous grant from the Jewish Funds for Justice, RAVSAK has created an exciting program in social justice programming and leadership for middle schools.

This program will empower classroom teachers with the skills, tools, knowledge and dispositions requisite to imparting meaningful social action education. Teachers will gain valuable resources, guidance, and insights enabling them to strengthen the connection between classroom learning and social action. This program represents a significant, exciting opportunity for teacher development, all expenses paid.

The centerpiece of the program is a two-day teacher training institute, scheduled for November 5th-6th. Here are some of the benefits that participants will receive at the institute:

- Explore the scope of Jewish sacred texts which attend to matters of social justice
- Discuss the wide range of Jewish responses to social and economic justice issues
- Connect Jewish community day school educators from across North America with the resources of the Jewish Funds for Justice
- Provide educators with a curricular framework upon which to build units or a course for middle school students
- Inspire teacher- and student-led social action projects and ongoing relationships with non-profit organizations dedicated to social justice

Besides the teacher training institute, schools will also receive the following support for strengthening their middle-school social justice programming:

- Monitoring teacher and school progress through institutional action plans
- Providing educators with a full year of support and guidance as well as peer mentoring and networking

Schools with enrollment under 150 students are eligible to send 1 teacher to the training; schools with enrollment over 150 students are eligible to send 2 teachers. All participating teachers will receive a certificate in social justice education.

To apply, or for more information, contact Elliott Rabin at erabin@ravsak.org.
intentional Jewish adults. I admit this runs counter to the notion of an inclusive Jewish school that reflects the diversity of the community by welcoming all those who identify as Jews and wish to practice it at their own levels whatever those may be. That, in essence, is a legitimate brief for the day school as an extension of a “natural” Judaic community, as the “public school” of the Jewish community.

However, I believe the success of Jewish education ought to be measured not by those who seek personal affirmation in their religious education, but by what RAVSAK indeed calls “its client”: the Jewish future. A day school model that merely reflects the extant community will, by definition, share in the latter’s fortunes, which for most of contemporary American Jewry means demographic decline, growing alienation, and a struggle to recruit the young.

The current realities, as I see them, call for reversing those trends by forming and supporting intentional Judaic communities that can serve as the “core” for concentric circles of Jews and actually help produce a population of purposeful Jewish adults to lead the wider Jewish community in and into the future. Day schools, like few other institutions, can meet that challenge, but they must pursue a robust Jewish purposefulness in everything they do to guarantee their students emerge as intentional Jewish adults with a sense of responsibility for other Jews. Our client—the Jewish future—deserves no less.

RAVSAK Launches SuLaM Alumni Network

With the generous support of the AVI CHAI Foundation, we are pleased to announce the start of the Project SuLaM Alumni Network. This is a most exciting addition to the overall efforts of Project SuLaM.

Program components will include:

- PS Alumni Network website to enhance communications, foster conversation, and provide an accessible point for the exchange of ideas and information.
- Dedicated sessions for Project SuLaM alumni held in conjunction with the RAVSAK Annual Leadership Conference in January.
- An Annual Alumni Shabbaton led by RAVSAK staff and mentors featuring high-caliber scholars/rabbis-in-residence, networking, a core curriculum of sacred text study, participant-led davening, and a vibrant forum for exploring essential issues of Jewish leadership.
- Judaic Learning Stipends for participants who have successfully completed Phase I to support ongoing Judaic learning.
- The SuLaM Alumni Network is open immediately to lay and professional participants and mentors in Cohort I and will be extended to those in Cohort II when they become alumni.

We are in the process of planning the calendar for the year. Sulamites interested in helping to shape the Alumni Network are encouraged to contact Dr. Marc N. Kramer at mkramer@ravsak.org or 212-665-1320.

Our thanks to AVI CHAI for their support.
RAVSAK Staff Updates
New Members of the RAVSAK Team

Shaya Klechevsky, Assistant to the Executive Director

Shaya Klechevsky is RAVSAK’s new assistant to the executive director. Born and raised in Brooklyn by two Israeli parents, Shaya attended Brooklyn College, receiving his degree in psychology and health and nutrition sciences. He later attended the French Culinary Institute, where he studied to become a classically trained French chef and now specializes in healthy, kosher, gourmet meals.

However, his affinity for the Jewish community drew him to find employment there. Shaya worked for the Jewish National Fund, where he rose to the position of fulfillment systems coordinator. Consequently, he joined his alma mater, the Yeshivah of Flatbush, where he worked as the information manager and creative consultant to the director of admissions and associate principal. Shaya will be using his many skills and talents in furthering the goals and progress of RAVSAK.

Rachel Bergstein, High School Coordinator

Rachel Bergstein has extensive experience in both formal and informal Jewish education. She worked as an adviser and Israel trip leader for United Synagogue Youth, and has taught in various institutions such as Yale University, Hadar, and the Center for Jewish History. Rachel holds a BA in Jewish Studies from the University of Pennsylvania and completed the Beit Midrash Program at the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education. Currently, Rachel is a PhD candidate in modern Jewish history at Yale University. She is writing her dissertation on Jews in the American South.

Rafi Cohen, Davidson Intern

Rafi Cohen is in his senior year of rabbinical school at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, and is pursuing an MA in Informal Jewish Education in the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education. He has served as the rabbinic intern at the Conservative Synagogue Adath Israel in Riverdale, New York, and held the same position at United Jewish Communities. He currently serves as amashgiach for the Emtza Region of USY and is involved with the Jewish educational and environmental organization Hazon, with which Rafi participated in a 300-mile bike ride from Jerusalem to Eilat. Rafi has studied at the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Rafi graduated from Brandeis University with a BA in Contemporary Jewish Studies. He currently lives in Riverdale with his wife Michele and his son Benjamin.

Good and Welfare

We wish Daniel Hotary, former Administrative Assistant, the best of luck as he pursues graduate school options back home in Michigan.

Much thanks to summer interns Gabriel Stutman and Claire Stern for their hard work and devotion.
Re/Presenting the Jewish Past

Re/Presenting the Jewish Past is a path-breaking new program designed to strengthen the teaching of Jewish history in day schools. The program is a collaboration between RAVSAK and The Network for the Teaching of Jewish History (NTJH), and it is funded by AVI CHAI. Re/Presenting is a three-part, fifteen month program in which a teams of teachers from a given school work closely with graduate students and established scholars in order to bring fresh insights, methodologies, and curricula into the classroom.

Each participating school was required to identify three or four teacher for the program. The team included teachers of Jewish history and related areas (e.g., Bible, rabbinics, or general history), so that these other disciplines enjoy the benefits of the innovative thinking animating their history colleagues. This past summer, participants attended a workshop at New York University conducted by leading scholars and educators in the field of Jewish history. The workshop encouraged the teams of teachers to think in innovative ways about the teaching of Jewish history in their schools.

By the end of the workshop, each team reported on its plans for reshaping the teaching of Jewish history during the upcoming academic year. These projects will focus on heightening teacher awareness of curricular issues and themes relating to the teaching of Jewish history. They are also designed to stimulate teacher creativity and foster greater cooperation among teachers across disciplines. Doctoral students will offer ongoing support for the school teams and their projects, and will facilitate regular contact among participating schools.

Mazel tov to the RAVSAK schools taking part this year!

Tanenbaum CHAT

Hyman Brand Hebrew Academy

Gann Academy

Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School

Bookcase

his column features books, articles, and websites recommended by our authors and people from the RAVSAK network, pertaining to the theme of the current issue of HaYidion, for readers who want to investigate the topic in greater depth.

Books


Articles


LIFE IS A JOURNEY. ISRAEL IS A FIRST STEP.

"Being in Israel and seeing it hits you in such an incredible way."
—Ari Stern

"Every day I think about last summer. I think about the places I saw and the Israelis I met and how inspiring they were. And most of all I think about the feelings I had...when I realized I was in the most beautiful place on earth. My experience has given me the drive to make a difference in the world."
—Dori Goldman

Young Judaea runs summer programs for high school students with optional European components as well as Year Course, a nine-month volunteer and study program for recent high school graduates. Scholarships are available.

CALL 800.725.0612 OR VISIT WWW.YOUNGJUDAEA.ORG
Bridges to Tomorrow:
Preparing For A Changing Reality

RAVSAK Annual Leadership Conference
January 18 – 20, 2009 • San Francisco, CA
See page 18 for more information.

RAVSAK
The Jewish Community Day School Network
120 West 97th Street
New York, NY 10025