

№32 / FALL 2023

THiNK

THE
LOLA
STEIN
INSTITUTE
JOURNAL

Conversation about Education, Ethics, and Our Children

MAH TOVU HOW GOODLY ARE YOUR TENTS

TEACHING FOR CLEAR THINKING / ATTENTION TO THE POWER OF WORDS
MINDFUL KINDERGARTEN / THE SPIRIT OF CLASSROOM COMMUNITY / SIGHTING POSITIVITY
THE RABBI AND HIS VERMEERS / THE ACTIVIST AND HER GARDEN

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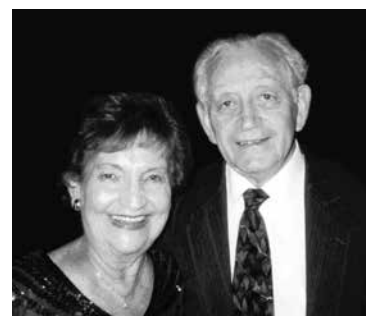
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The Lola Stein Institute is the research and publication arm of The Geshar Abraham Foundation. Under this umbrella, the integrated Jewish studies espoused by The Lola Stein Institute are delivered at The Toronto Heschel School, a Jewish day school in Toronto, Canada.

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Lola Stein z"l was an early female pharmacist in South Africa, but her special talent was in hospitality and friendship. She cared for family and friends, at home and abroad, individually, uniquely, and lovingly. We honour her memory in a way that also reaches out to many. We lovingly remember Mannie Stein z"l whose enthusiasm and support for our work with children is gratefully acknowledged.



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Perspective and the Importance of Clear Sight

I can see clearly now, the rain is gone
 I can see all obstacles in my way
 Gone are the dark clouds that had
 me blind
 It's gonna be a bright, bright
 Sun-Shiny day

—Johnny Nash

Playgrounds online and off are strewn with mixed messages and peer pressures. From our hilltop at the dawn of a new school year, we look out and find that in this age of torrential information and immediate answers, it's increasingly difficult for children to grab hold of what is in front of them. On screens they find mesmerizing data from mysterious sources. Yikes. It feels like chaos. But wait, it's not. Changing times always call for revised skills and, to quote Morah Kati Kovari, we just have to "pause, look, and listen."

Ashkenazi tradition opens daily prayer with the song *Mah Tov*, saying, "Ah, yes, this is a good thing." Three self-referencing phrases make the moment personal.

As for me...in Your great kindness, I will come into
 Your house...
 As for me...I will bow in worship...
 As for me...may my prayer come to You, Lord, at a
 time of favour.

Self-awareness is the beginning of the capacity to see clearly. Moshe Feldenkrais, the Israeli Ukrainian scientist, Judo devotee, and world-famous healer, taught that a human body can be re-educated from neurologically imprinted missteps to cure itself of many physical conditions. At the forefront of neuroplastic discovery, his "Learning to Learn" technique begins with a suffering individual who is learning to discard habits and beliefs that impede wellness. Feldenkrais wrote,

Efficient movement or performance of any sort is achieved by weeding out, and eliminating, parasitic superfluous exertion. The superfluous is as bad as the insufficient, only it costs more.¹

Our vision to teach children to think honestly and critically requires first of all that they see clearly, acknowledge possibilities, note clouds that threaten, and commit to values and choices. Weeding out obstructions to learning is the focus of this issue of THINK. As you will read,



a talking donkey is one way but there are others. Joan Garson and Joe Kanofsky share how they stay tuned to what is good for their souls, what keeps their lenses clear.

Our THINK writers consider the many meanings of the biblical narrative of *Mah Tov*. In *Awe and Wonder*, Greg Beiles explains that we can insulate our children from competing agendas if we stay alert to what will limit a child's unique potential. In the Learning Studio, Dvora Goodman introduces positive psychology at school, and Jewish methods that keep it going. Likewise, Judith Leitner led a group of teachers through a process of self-discovery last year, knowing well, as a Toronto Heschel School co-founder, that teachers' inspiration and devotion are as essential to their students' progress as it is to their own. Self-portraits and quotes taken from My Voice My Jewish Lens: Leadership Through Self-Portrait Photography workshops capture these insights.

Our teacher contributors nourish student integrity from a variety of vantage points. Alan Rusonik, Toronto Heschel School Principal, emphasizes the power of words

and the myriad Jewish teachings informing this truth; Heidi Friedman, Heschel's Director of Student Support and Teacher Mentoring, highlights the interplay of personal and collective spirit in spaces that serve the children especially well; Early Years educator, Kati Kovari, shares how self-regulation blossoms with the integration of mindfulness practices across the curriculum; Chen Tanenbaum, whose focus is Judaic Studies in Junior High, shows students the clash of the literal and figurative in ancient text and shares how when the physical and meta-physical seem at odds, that an even wider vista becomes apparent; and Caity Lehman, who develops curriculum in The Lola Stein Teacher Performance and Learning Studio to train students for thinking critically in our numbers-driven times.

There's so much to see. Take a look, and bon voyage for another school year!

Pam

¹ Moshe Feldenkrais, "Learn to Learn" (Berkeley, CA: Feldenkrais Resources, n.d.), p. 2, retrieved August 31, 2023, from <https://thinkinginmovement.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Learn-to-Learn-MF-numbering-by-KH-Legal-8p.pdf>.



AWE & WONDER

Revealing Goodness

“FALLEN WITH OPEN EYES”

BY GREG BEILES

In the Bible, animals rarely speak. So when they do, we should take another look. Legend has it that the wise King Solomon understood the language of many animals. But, in the entire Hebrew Bible, animals speak directly to humans only twice. Famously, the beguiling snake speaks with Chava in Gan Eden; less well known is the donkey who speaks to Balaam, the Moabite prophet.

Rare occurrences such as these jolt us from complacency, forcing us to put aside preconceptions and see things in a new way. And so it is with Balaam’s talking donkey.

The incident takes place in the biblical book of Bamidbar (Numbers) where the Moabite King Balak is alarmed by the Israelites who have recently arrived from Egypt, freed by God from slavery. Fearful of their divinely sanctioned presence, Balak commands Balaam to curse the Israelites in hopes of weakening them in the event of war. Through the lens of fear, Balak perceives them as so numerous that they “have covered the ‘eye’ of the land” (22:5). The evocative metaphor foreshadows the significance of optics in this text.

Soon after, Balaam dreams that God tells him not to curse these blessed people (22:12). Balaam feels torn between two voices of authority: the orders of his king and the command of God. He wavers between his role as servant of the court and his identity as the speaker of prophetic truth. Whether to curse or bless is a choice between deference to authority and personal integrity.

How often do we, like Balaam, interpret our reality through the lens of roles pressed on us by circumstance or expectation? How do we manage these filters so that we can protect our individuality and understand our own values? For teachers, the dilemma can present itself positively by helping us to clarify whether we accept our role passively as functionaries of paid duty or, alternatively, to stay true to our personal and professional commitment to teach with enthusiasm and purpose. Like Balaam, we can either handle new ideas in a detached and dispirited way or with fresh reflection on the possibilities, thereby opening ourselves to their merits.

As Balaam sets out on his journey to view the Israelites, his donkey sees an angel of God standing on the road holding a sword. The donkey turns off the road into a field, kneels down, and refuses to budge. Balaam strikes the donkey repeatedly hoping to get him back on track until finally the donkey “opens his mouth” and asks: “Am I not your donkey that you have ridden all your life until this day? Have I been accustomed to do such a thing as this to you?” (22:30). When Balaam finally acknowledges that the donkey’s behaviour is indeed unprecedented, God uncovers Balaam’s eyes and he perceives an angel now blocking his path.

The reason that Balaam strikes his donkey over and over again is because Balaam assumes this anomalous behaviour just needs correction. His past experiences blind him from perceiving anything else. Customary ingrained patterns of thinking and acting challenge us to see new options, even when the old paradigms are blocking advancement. In the parlance of professional educators, we call this phenomenon “teacher tapes,” that is, the patterns of teaching and learning that were embedded in our minds by the many years we sat as young students ourselves in classrooms. The lens of past habits can impede innovation drastically. Once aware of our ingrained habits of thinking and the biases they carry, then like Balaam, wisdom opens the road to progress on our own professional journeys. Sometimes it takes a startling experience—even a talking donkey?—to shake us from complacency.

Seeing that his agent, Balaam, is beginning to pierce the predispositions of authority and past experience, Balak tries a different tactic. He suggests that if Balaam would only look at the Israelites from a particular—call it partisan?—angle, then he would surely see what is abhorrent about them, “Come with me to another place from where you will see them; you will see only a part of them, not all of them, and curse them for me from there” (23:13). Balaam and Balak agree to build a sacrificial altar so that divine signs may verify whether to bless or curse the Israelites.

We recognize these tactics in the culture wars of today, in academia, and in popular social media. Perceptions funnel through ever-narrowing communication channels honed by algorithms for preset perspectives and ideologies; in fact, from any online point of view, a field is only partially visible and has been curated to bolster a very particular direction. The field of education is hardly immune. We are jeopardizing the learning of a whole generation of students if we complacently allow polarized agendas to co-opt our pursuit of literacy, science, creative thought, and critical thinking.

Balaam rejects Balak’s scheme because, despite relentless pressure to the contrary, “he saw that it was good in God’s eyes to bless Israel.” Instead of “turning towards divinations, he turned his face towards the desert.” Balaam abandons the search for symbols from burning altars, and looks into the wilderness. He opens himself to possibility and mystery, to see what might be there without

preconception. He declares, “These are the words of the man with the open eye...who sees the vision of Shaddai [God], fallen with open eyes” (24:15–16). With pure openness and clarity of sight, he utters the famous blessing: “*Mah tovu ohalekha Ya’akov, mishk’notekha Yisra’el*” (What goodness are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel).

The Jewish-French philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, writes that ethics begins with the capacity to see goodness in the “other,” without preconceived ideas or categories. It begins with a humble and vulnerable way of seeing, as for Balaam, “fallen with open eyes.” Levinas says that “ethics is the spiritual optics.”

Equating ethics and spiritual vision corresponds to Abraham Joshua Heschel’s admonition to see the world through eyes of awe and wonder. He is not recommending naivety but the transcendence that comes with wisdom. How Balaam learns to look is the crux of this tale; first he tries to see the valley according to the terms of his

appointment, his day job; then he trusts his experiences that taught him donkeys do not converse; and, finally, he is asked to evaluate through the bias of a partial vantage point. Only after these modes of looking are past does Balaam just open his eyes, look ahead without

expectation, and see that this collection of refugees are a good people.

Seeing the goodness in what is new requires a willing suspension of anxiety and disbelief. This is a lesson for us all. Both teachers and parents often feel it’s easier and safer to rely on past roles and guidebooks, and make decisions according to habit and long-standing paradigms. But we learn from Balaam that whether we bless or we curse, we first must see clearly what stands before us.

Goodness reveals itself most clearly when we are “fallen with open eyes.” We must remember to turn our faces directly towards our children, keeping them in front and not hidden by competing priorities. They are young and freshly arrived in this land of opportunity. Our responsibility as educators is to secure for them the ability to flourish in this evolving world where screens speak to them with authority, algorithmic thinking is modelled as intelligence, and partisan agendas claim their loyalty even before they can learn to see for themselves.

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

We must turn our faces towards our children, keeping them in front, not hidden by competing priorities.



THE LEARNING STUDIO

Jewish Positivity

BY DVORA GOODMAN

Positive psychology offers a metaphor that is helpful in life generally, but for present purposes, the notion helps us to visualize a way to empower our children to learn. The idea is called psychological capital and it imagines psychological bank accounts with deposits and withdrawals that enhance or drain the balance. A child's experience of positive emotion—fulfillment, interest, or amusement—is, figuratively speaking, a deposit that increases psychological capital as a storehouse of emotional strength, while an engagement with negative emotion—shame, vulnerability, or sadness—is a withdrawal that depletes resources. So how do we fill the imaginary pot?

Children bring their best selves to school when their psychological bank accounts brim with capital. This makes intuitive sense to anyone who has witnessed children thriving at home and at school; they show joy and contentment, they focus intently, and they engage enthusiastically in what is asked of them. On the flip side, students who show frustration and bursts of anger are not flourishing and may be described as low in psychological capital. No matter where or why the negativity emerges, children, who are emotionally depleted, find it difficult to sustain the psychological resources required to fuel and refuel their learning and development.

Added to this is the natural human tendency to drain reserves in double digits yet deposit in single digits. Negative emotions feel more impactful and are more deeply absorbed than positive emotions. This negative bias in human nature makes sense from an evolutionary point of view—primitive humans who ignored signs of danger put their lives in jeopardy. They took less note of the positive which did not factor into their survival. Today, we aspire to more than the mere survival of our children. We want to fill their psychological bank accounts with empowering nutrients so that they can withstand drainage and thrive.

One of the things I love about Judaism is how—if we practise them—our beliefs and rituals make regular

deposits into our psychological bank accounts. We begin the day with gratitude, a famously effective positive emotion.

Gratitude is the healthiest of all human emotions. The more you express gratitude for what you have, the more likely you will have even more to express gratitude for.

—Zig Ziglar

First thing in the morning, still in bed, we can recite the prayer known as *Modeh Ani*. I appreciate this prayer as it sets a tone of gratitude at the outset of the day. We awake and give thanks for another day in this world. What is exciting today? What will make us happy? What can we do for our family, friends, and community? The prayer is an opening posture for positivity.

We continue with *Birkot Hashachar* (Blessings of the Dawn), a further prescription for appreciation. We thank God for the renewal of the day, for the workings of our bodies, for the study of Torah. We express gratitude for all that allows us to be us: our ability to distinguish between night and day, our ability to see; for having our needs met, for having guidance on our path, and for being strengthened with courage as a people.

Often the currently popular trend of mindfulness is thought to derive from Eastern traditions, but Jewish mindfulness has been at play for thousands of years. Taking stock and acknowledging special moments remind us where we are, what we cherish, and how we sense the benefit it brings. We say the blessing of *Shehecheyanu* when a momentous occasion occurs and on Jewish holidays; it articulates a particular moment as special, perhaps a family gathering to celebrate, a first or last day of school acknowledging children growing, or making a first Torah blessing. Mindful acknowledgements deposit real value in our psychological capital.

Jewish tradition also nourishes emotional capital through the performance of *Gemilut Chasadim*, often translated as Acts of Loving Kindness. There are lists and lists of ways and moments to care for and serve family, friends, and strangers. Some lie embedded into holiday practice, such as *Matanot L'Evyonim* (Gifts for the Poor) on Purim, others emerge from the kind of community that we aspire to create, such as *Bikur Cholim* (Visiting the Sick), *Hachnasat Orchim* (Welcoming Guests), and the instructions to celebrate people getting married.

Positive psychology extends the idea of personal

accounts to resources that enrich interpersonal relationships and fuel community spirit, i.e., social capital. Something exciting happens in a school when people intentionally focus on social capital: somehow kindness connects to kindness and generates a velocity that expands and grows. There's even research showing that just thinking about someone who has done something nice for you puts you in a space where you are more likely to want to do something nice for someone else.¹

At Toronto Heschel, we advocate for students to act positively towards those around them through a school-wide program called *Middat Hashavua* (The Virtue of the Week). A selected teaching from the weekly Torah portion is posted and all week long, teachers and students find ways to put the *middah* into practice. *Middah* means “measure” and students learn that it matters how we measure up ethically and that to measure oneself involves self-reflection and the practice of respectful, thoughtful interactions with others: “Think before you act,” “Be generous,” “Be compassionate and slow to anger,” and “Make sure everyone counts.” For example, the *middah* to “be welcoming” relates to *Parshat Vayera* where Avraham and Sarah host three guests. Repeatedly, when this particular *middah* is on tap, guests to our school remark with pleasure on the happy hosting and door holding they observe. This weekly habit of virtue in practice invests regular deposits in the personal and social psychological capital of our school family. It foments an upward spiral of positivity that strengthens everyone; the more positivity there is schoolwide, the more appears in classrooms, and the filling of individual accounts continues.

Rabbi A. J. Heschel wrote, “Many things on earth are precious, some are holy, humanity is holy of holies.”² Each child is a treasure. To me, it's heartwarming to connect how positivity in our school community draws spirit from our Jewish tradition: we work hard to make each kid feel unique, respected, and precious, like everyone around them. We deposit goodness and strength in very intentional ways. What we invest in their hearts and souls really matters.

¹ Emilia Zhivotovskaya, “Trauma Response” (Course notes for Positive Education Certificate, The Center for Positive Education, Fall 2022).

² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *No Religion Is an Island: Abraham Joshua Heschel and Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. Harold Kasimow and Byron L. Sherwin, reissue ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), p. 8.

Dvora Goodman is Coordinator of The Lola Stein Institute. She works as an educational consultant in a variety of settings.

Children bring their best selves to school when their psychological bank accounts brim with capital.

Jewish beliefs and rituals make regular deposits into our store of positivity.

JEWISH FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The Secret Ingredient

BY DANI PLANT



If you ask me, the first day of the new school year is the “real” New Year’s Day, with equal amounts of anticipation, fresh starts and resolutions, but without the dropping ball and the fireworks (unless you count temper tantrums). Instead of noisemakers and party hats, the kids are handed shiny new agenda books while parents treat themselves to new Tupperware that still seals.

The abrupt overnight change of seasons trades in lazy summer nights and the smell of sunscreen for bedtime routines and parents who become paparazzi, snapping photos of their children on the first day of school documenting the clean slate of entering a new grade. This feeling of new beginnings extends to the home and invites the warmth, traditions, and reflections of Rosh Hashanah. The start of a new school year and the start of a new Jewish year somehow just seem synergistic, the gift of a

moment to have one foot in the past with our traditions and rituals, but also one foot in the future to reflect on our hopes for the coming year. We experience all this as a community and with our families—in school, in Shul, or at home—but as always, the most meaningful moments happen around our kitchen tables.

Food possesses an uncanny ability to stir our emotions and tether us to certain moments in our lives—an edible scrapbook, each dish bookmarking a memory, a feeling, a connection. The taste of Bubbie’s chicken soup that can cure everything from a cold to a broken heart transports us back to the warmth of her kitchen, while the scent of a certain spice evokes an unforgettable holiday meal. Shared meals bond family and friends, turning simple sustenance into celebrations of love. Food nourishes our body as well as our souls, depending on what is called for

at a given moment. A quick dinner before an evening of activities provides fuel to keep moving after the hustle and bustle of the day, but the Shabbat table on Friday night replenishes our soul and fulfills a completely different need.

Even the solitary act of baking or cooking can be a therapeutic ritual, a means to express and manage our thoughts and feelings. Food interweaves in our emotional tapestry, uniting us with others and with our past. The chocolate that I can be found sneaking at midnight while eating through my feelings is no less spiritual than other meditations, and the self-reflection and atonement the next morning can be very reminiscent of Yom Kippur.

No matter the occasion, we always remember “good food,” which is generally defined by taste, quality of ingredients, health benefits, or its presentation, characteristics that are based on facts. “Great food” is designated by how it makes you feel and it is that emotional connection that forms our memory of its greatness. When I was a child, my mother would make crepes every Sunday morning. We would wake up to the aroma of vanilla wafting through the house, sit down as a family to an assortment of fillings and toppings, and eat breakfast together. Now when I make crepes for my kids, those same smells transport me right back to those memories.

Another family tradition when I was growing up is that my father would make cranberry juice from scratch, boiling the cranberries for hours. He often did this after a long day of work, and on one occasion he fell asleep while it was boiling and almost burned our house down. Luckily, my sister smelled the smoke and woke everyone up so we could evacuate. To this day we ask my dad if he’s made any “smoked cranberry juice” lately and even my children, who have only heard the story, will request anything he cooks to be smoked (and not just because he is Russian, and it seems to be the only way they knew how to prepare food in the Soviet Union). His cranberry juice was not as decadent as my mother’s crepes, but both meet the criteria for greatness. Both made deposits in my memory bank and link me emotionally to my past and my family.

As a trained chef, it feels controversial to say that it’s not all about the food. Nonetheless, in my home, the phrase used when we cook is *Sababa*, meaning “it’s all good,” the idea that the best meals may stem from the worst mistakes. Whether a recipe is followed to the letter or is more of a guideline with something entirely new emerging (even burned to a crisp), the love is in the learning and experience of sitting together. In my early cooking days as a young girl, I was horrendous in the kitchen and mixed ingredients that had no business being combined; however, I had no choice but to learn because the concept of

ordering in was entirely foreign to me. Where I came from “take out” was the homemade food you took with you when you left the house for a trip to the park. My kids have the same “take-out” experience now, but worse, because they actually know what fast food is. They see it outside the car window while I speed past.

Food is my love language, the first one I learned and it requires no translation. It is an expression of love when words are not accessible. A special birthday cake to celebrate, a *shiva* meal to comfort, chicken soup as Jewish penicillin if someone is ill, or banana muffins just to say I love you. This love language is genetic, I got the trait from my mom who would always feed the neighbourhood. When I asked her why, she would say that, to her, food was love because, where she came from (as with many Jewish people throughout history), food was scarce, and to share food was to share love. As someone who looked like a chubby Cabbage Patch doll growing up, she definitely loved me the most.

**It’s not
all about the food.**

Now as an adult, when my house fills with my children’s friends, animals, loved ones, and even the UPS man (who became like family over the pandemic), the Jewish mother in me comes out in full force; everyone must be fed and maybe even take a snack for the road. My desire to prepare food to express my love for those I love is natural; the Hebrew word for love is *ahava* and its root word, *hav*, means to give. I feel that same love when my son offers me a bite of his favourite dessert, or a friend surprises me with crunchy Cheezies, which happen to be my weakness, or when my family was given a hot meal after I had surgery and was unable to cook.

At the banquet of Jewish life, food is the secret ingredient in the recipe for heritage, culture, and community. And within Jewish culture, food is not just food, it’s involvement—a full on sensory-filled, calendar-packed, family-drama-infused experience. From brisket to bagels, kugel to knishes, each creation is a deliciously edible bookmark in the storybook of Jewish history. It’s as if every Jewish mother competed in a secret culinary Olympics, with gold medals awarded for the “longest matzo ball soup simmer” or “most creative use of gefilte fish.” But the real trophy is the laughter, conversation, and relationships that flow around the dinner table. Our food traditions do not just keep us full, they give us sustenance with connection, reminding us of our love, our history, and giving us one more thing to discuss, debate, and, of course, digest.

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

THE CLASSROOM PERSPECTIVE



Mah Tovu

THE POWER OF OUR WORDS

BY ALAN RUSONIK

Have you ever asked yourself: Of all the teachings in our tradition, all the fantastic narratives, beautiful poems and prose from the Tanach (the Bible), why does the Siddur, which was developed over many centuries, begin our prayer service with the *tefillah* (prayer), *Mah Tovu*? I know that I have.

I find it remarkable that the first line of the Siddur comes from a Torah narrative found in Numbers 24:5, where Balak, the King of Moab, sends Bilaam, a non-Jewish prophet for hire, to curse the Israelites. Balaam fully intends to curse, but on seeing how the Israelites live, how their tents are ordered and organized, God turns his intentions around and his words become a blessing, the very blessing that is the opening prayer in our Siddur today. But why? Why do comments uttered by a stranger make any kind of difference? Why does God's interference in these words matter so much?

I find this fascinating, especially as I am an educator. I believe there is profound meaning in why this "curse turned blessing" introduces our *tefillah*.

As we begin to pray, we are embarking on our formal daily dialogue with God. Tradition suggests that we speak to God through prayer and God speaks to us through words of Torah. In *Mah Tovu*, I see intentionality at work, I see a mnemonic—a device that reminds us every day of the potency of our words. As with Balaam, we pray that God will help us speak truth.

Our words are one of the most impactful tools we possess. The world itself was spoken into existence, created by divine fiat, through God's words,

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אֹר וַיְהִי-אֹר

Let there be light! And there was light.
(Genesis 1:3)

In the image of God, we humans also use words as we create our own lives—sharing our thoughts, feelings, and intentions. It is a capacity that sets us apart from all other living things and is in the footsteps of our Creator.

Do we give the same attention to our words at home, at school, and at work?

Mah Tovu draws me directly to one of my favourite pearls of wisdom in the Torah, and, I believe, one of its most compelling maxims:

מָוֶת וְחַיִּים בְּיַד-לָשׁוֹן

Death and life are in the power of the tongue.
(Proverbs 18:21)
(Literally, "the hand" of the tongue.)

The Talmud expands on this teaching: "Rabbi Hama, son of Rabbi Hanina, says:...the verse comes to tell you that just as a hand can kill, so too a tongue can kill."

The Gemara continues:

This verse is necessary for a statement of Rava, as Rava says: "One who wants Life can attain it by means of his tongue, which he can use for speaking appropriately and studying Torah. One who wants death can also attain it by means of his tongue, by using it for inappropriate and malicious speech." (Talmud Arakhin 15b:22, 15b:25)

In her introduction to *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, an edited collection of essays by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Susannah Heschel tells us that her father was very sensitive to words,

Words, he often wrote, are themselves sacred, God's tool for creating the universe, and our tools for bringing holiness—or evil—into the world. He used to remind us that the Holocaust did not begin with the building of crematoria, and Hitler did not come to power with tanks and guns; it all began with uttering evil words, with defamation, with language and propaganda. Words create worlds, he used to tell me when I was a child. They must be used very carefully. Some words, once having been uttered, gain eternity and can never be withdrawn. The Book of Proverbs reminds us, he wrote, that death and life are in the power of the tongue.¹

Our sages have long recognized the tremendous consequence of words; they matter, and how we use them matters even more. Appropriate speech is called *shmirat halashon* (guarding our tongue) and remembering it is

critical to a decent, moral, and ethical life. Rabbi Israel Meir HaKohen Kagan (1838–1933), known by the name of his most famous book, the *Chofetz Chayim* (Desirer or seeker of life), lists 31 *mitzvot* (Torah laws) which may be violated if one speaks or listens to *lashon hara* (evil speech). This is a staggering number. Even if not violated all at once, the sheer quantity underscores how careless speech brings deeper trouble, sometimes with the increasing momentum of a chain reaction.

Having begun our daily interaction with God with a focus on the power of words, we close the Siddur and proceed into conversation with family, friends, and colleagues. Do we stay true to this mindful framework? Do we give the same level of attention to words at home, at school, or at work? How do we speak on the playground or sports field? Does our language shift when we speak in person, by phone, or on Zoom? Are we careful with messages delivered by email or text? These exchanges all matter. Just as we begin our day with thoughtful praise and thanks to God for the blessings in our lives, we must apply the same intentionality to the words we utter as we go about our everyday routines.

Words have consequences. They can destroy or create; cut down or build up; hurt and harm, or help and heal. Whether to curse or to bless is up to us. The next time you recite *Mah Tovu*, think about what rolls off your tongue. It makes all the difference, and it's up to you.

Parenthetically, there is a tradition at The Toronto Heschel School for our Grade 8 graduates to create a "graffiti wall"—a mural honouring their educational experience at our school. After I completed the first draft of this essay, I learned that the 2023 graduates had chosen the verse from Proverbs 18 that I quote above for their mural. Was this a coincidence or was it *besheit* (meant to be)? I will let you decide. Either way, it tells how, during their educational journey here at Heschel, our graduates have come to understand the power of their words. We hope and pray that they continue to embody these and the other important lessons they have learned at our school for many years to come.

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), pp. viii–ix.

Alan Rusonik is Principal of The Toronto Heschel School. He is happy to be back in Toronto after many years as an educational leader in the USA.



Graffiti project of The Toronto Heschel graduates '23.
Translation: "Death and life are in the power of the tongue" (Proverbs 18:21).

Pause, Look, and Listen...

MINDFUL KINDERGARTEN AT TORONTO HESCHEL

BY KATALIN SZABO KOVARI

At 8:20 in the morning, the school day comes alive. The hallways are filled with the children's voices as they enter the kindergarten rooms and start to engage and socialize with one another. The class echoes with stories and shared experiences, creating a vibrant atmosphere in preparation for the day. The class is noisy. It is a beautiful noise, full of life. At 8:40, the notes of the xylophone sound.

Hearing the arpeggio, the students promptly stop their activity, pause, and direct their curious eyes towards their teachers to hear what awaits them next. It is so quiet. Just a little signal, a little sound, and they pause to listen.

It takes time and practice for some to learn how to stop or pause on the first try. Our experience tells us that little signs and signals can be very powerful devices in teaching the mindful art of pausing. Whether they be images or sounds, small sensory signals can guide children effectively towards mastering the skill to pause; it is a very important capability because, eventually, it leads to the ability to self-regulate and focus attention.

In Junior Kindergarten, students learn from the Torah that after God created the world, even God paused, stopped creating, and took time to reflect. When we recite *Mah Tov* in the morning, we remember that Bilaam, a prophet for hire, was sent by King Balak to curse the Israelites who had been wandering the desert. Bilaam's journey was interrupted by his own donkey who stopped and refused to move forward. Bilaam struck the donkey, hoping it would help him go on with his plan. But the donkey still wouldn't move. "And the Lord opened the donkey's mouth and it said to Bilaam: What have I done to you that you have struck me this three times?" (Numbers 22:28). In this text, the donkey was Bilaam's signal to Stop! Pause! Listen! Finally, Bilaam paused, looked, and listened.

He learned to look around and witness the tents of the Jewish people who were sharing kindness with each other.

Within our classroom we take advantage of prompts that inspire us to pause. They remind us to notice, think, and moderate our actions. Mindful awareness is more than a meditation; it is an integral part of a child's introduction to education which, in many ways, hinges on building self-regulation from an early age.

At Heschel, our integrated mindfulness practices play a big role in developing what neuropsychology calls "executive function." Research shows that students who were less regulated before the implementation of a mindfulness program benefited the most from one, indicating that those in need of executive function skill-building can benefit greatly from mindfulness interventions. In our kindergarten classes we use mindfulness across the academic disciplines in a consistent and intentional way.

Mindfulness and Tefillah

The Junior Kindergarten students start their mindfulness journey on the first day of school, as they listen to the tune of *Modeh Ani* during *tefillah*. Their little hands mirror the teacher's movements, following the rise and fall of the Hoberman sphere or breathing ball, which is a ball that expands and contracts and is often used as a visual guide for children in mindful breathing exercises. Students follow the teacher as she inhales deeply while slowly expanding the ball and then exhales gradually as she closes it. This pattern repeats a few times, then the children try to remain engaged and follow the rest of the prayer.

We are teaching the children to think calmly about each act being modelled and the words being said. Months later, after learning about the Torah's description

of the Days of Creation, this mindful approach to listening and learning serves as a comfortable method for integrating their feelings and their knowledge. The children gather all the Hebrew vocabulary they have learned and, word by word, express gratitude for God's creation. After the prayer, they are invited to pause, look around, and wonder about God's work: Why did God place all these beautiful creations around us? How do they help each of us? We ask what thoughts come to mind when they list all that they have to be grateful for today? Do they feel connected to God when they notice the creations? What I notice is the contentment and readiness to learn that the children show when their personal reflections are regularly articulated and integrated.

Looking back 15 years ago, if someone had asked me to pose such questions to my four- and five-year-old students, I may have hesitated, doubting their ability to understand. However, a decade of daily mindfulness practice during *tefillah*, with the repetition of thought-provoking questions, demonstrates clearly how useful this process is in helping children to develop skills in critical thinking.

The sound of a chime. Breathing.

In Junior Kindergarten, either during rest time or after a physical education class, the little ones participate in guided body scan sessions that we link to the generative learning theme of the week or month. In these sessions, the sound of a chime serves as our signal, guiding students to focus on their breath.

Our indoor mindful space.

A frequently used area in our kindergarten classes is the Mindfulness Table Corner. Students learn from the beginning of the year that this table serves to provide them comfort when they feel anxious or are navigating a conflict. The table is a private space and each child can use the space for what will help them in the moment, using whichever mindfulness and breathing techniques suit them best.

Our outdoor mindful space.

Giant sunflowers, the delightful fragrance of a medicinal garden, and cultivated attractive plants in the Heschel Garden invite the children to learn more about God's creations. The sparkling morning dew tickles their ankles as they go for a mindful walk through the grass. In this peaceful setting, curiosity blossoms along with interesting questions and conversations about the wonders of Creation.

The brain. Our emotions.

In Senior Kindergarten one of the most beloved units among our students is about the brain and emotional awareness. When I was a first-time Senior Kindergarten teacher, I was in absolute awe when I saw how interested and engaged the students were in learning about the different parts of the brain, and most importantly, the amygdala. Days later, after introducing this unit, children confidently began using terms like *hippocampus*, *prefrontal cortex*, and *amygdala* in different contexts.

While navigating a conflict, one of my students said, "I think my amygdala is red. I need to change its colour. I'll go use the Feeling Jar to calm down." When I happened to forget something, another student advised, "Morah Kati, you need to use your hippocampus." Understanding how different parts of the brain affect thinking and emotions gives students more information with which to recognize and solve challenges in managing a conflict or a stressful situation.

Imagination—our superpower in mathematical and Chumash practices

Visualization deepens understanding and we use it for mindful learning. Before introducing a visualization practice, I remind students that they have an incredible superpower that not all living creatures possess: their imagination. In math classes, I might incorporate visualization exercises as a warm-up to describe attributes of a shape, or match a number of imagined dots by showing fingers on their hands.

During Chumash lessons, we give them the opportunity to imagine travelling back in time to see what the space, people, and events might have looked like: the feel of the desert sand beneath their feet, or the awakening sound of the shofar. In their mind's eye, they get a vivid sense for the texts and materials we are learning, replete with awe and wonder.

At The Toronto Heschel School, mindfulness is not just a simple practice. It is a core teaching method, a lifestyle, a way to develop self-regulation skills, social skills, and the ability to navigate learning difficulties and increase critical thinking skills. We will continue to integrate mindfulness throughout our ever-evolving curriculum, enriching the minds and hearts of our wonderful students.

Katalin Szabo Kovari holds an MA in Educational Psychology. Her primary focus is social and emotional development in the early years. Kati teaches JK at The Toronto Heschel School.

Education hinges on building self-regulation from an early age.

Sanctuary in Grade 1

MY WISE AND GENEROUS HEART CREATES THE SPACE WHERE GOD DWELLS

BY HEIDI FRIEDMAN

In Grade 1, the children create a beautiful sacred space in their classroom. Built collaboratively by all members of the classroom community, it becomes an integral and central sanctuary epitomizing what it means for the children to be in a community that is rooted in care.

The space becomes a place to go for some quiet, to nourish oneself and re-regulate; a place to resolve a conflict with a peer while surrounded by examples of previous positive resolutions to classroom disputes; a place to play a game with a friend or teach a classmate a new skill. Translating literally to mean tabernacle, a *mishkan* is a holy space in the classroom in which the children feel God's presence.

Our classroom *mishkan* project stems from a few lines of Torah text, and to fully understand how we might create a sacred beautiful space in our classroom, we look first to our source text. The Book of Exodus (35:5,10) tells us that when the *B'nei Yisrael*, the Children of Israel, were building their *mishkan* in the desert, Moshe (Moses) asked for those with a willing compassionate heart (*nadiv lev*) to bring their treasure and generosity for the building, and those with a wise heart (*chacham lev*) to add their craftsmanship and skill. In ancient times the word "heart" was synonymous with "thought" and people believed that thinking occurred in the heart. The Torah's ideas of *chacham lev* and *nadiv lev* ground themselves in the belief that in order for communities to flourish, members must contribute both their collective spirit and their individual skills. This duality is the overarching idea that guides learning in the spring semester of Grade 1 at The Toronto Heschel School.

The children embark on this unit of study learning the Torah text from Exodus; they sit in a learning circle as the teacher reads the ancient words. The children ask questions, make connections, notice patterns, and by the end of the learning circle, as a group, they have co-constructed the definition of a *chacham lev* and a *nadiv lev*, a wise heart that adds know-how and skill and a willing heart that brings generosity of spirit. By continually referencing these same words in different contexts, students come to understand some very profound concepts that are core to making a space holy and sacred; hands and hearts together, they begin to conceive the coming together of the individual and the collective.

The students then look at designs and drawings of what may have been the holy place that the Israelites built in the desert. Keeping the Torah text and our pictures in mind, we reimagine a new understanding of the *mishkan* narrative and the children explore how they might create the specialness of a *mishkan* in their classroom. We decide to establish a sacred space where we can be especially in touch with God in our midst, based on the same principles of using both their *chacham lev* and *nadiv lev*.

The children become active participants in an experience that, step by step, consistently taps into their individual skills, their collaborative capabilities, their intentions, and their resilience. The project begins with a white cotton sheet, rubber balls, and paint. Each child stands around the circumference of the sheet, holding its edges as their teacher gently rolls onto it a ball that is covered in paint. The students are tasked to use their *chacham lev* (skills) to keep the ball moving around the sheet



and their *nadiv lev* (collective spirit or social awareness) to send the ball over to a peer so that a network of interconnected lines emerge on the fabric. Next they contribute more skills (*chacham lev*), now in visual arts to spray and drop more paint on the sheet to create a brightly coloured piece of material that will be used to build their *mishkan*. Together, they have transformed a white cotton sheet into a magnificent piece of art.

The children next work collaboratively to tear the painted sheet into strips. The teachers rearrange the classroom shelving units so that their backs form a walled space and prepare hooks for the children to use. Working with partners, the children fasten the painted fabric strips to the newly minted walled niche, weaving the strips together to symbolize a unified community.

The project integrates language arts with the children practising skills in observation, expression, and procedural writing. Throughout the project we teachers focus very deliberately on heightening student awareness of when they are personally acting in a heartfelt way and when they see others showing positive communal actions. The moments may arise when a friend helps them in math or they assist someone with another challenge. The children embrace their role as "*nadiv lev* detectives" enthusiastically. They are excited to point out acts of generosity among their peers, either immediately writing down the descriptions themselves or seeking the teacher's help to acknowledge the event; it is spring and most students are writing well. The goal is for the children to catch the moments, identify them, and live the language by articulating them. Their notes adorn the walls of the decorated space, their *mishkan*, reminders of how we can use our skills (*chacham lev*) to inspire others (*nadiv lev*).

Together, the students write a detailed procedural book, a handbook, on how to use one's *chacham lev* and *nadiv lev* to create a classroom *mishkan*—each child contributes a page. The book becomes a legacy gift to the school and especially to incoming Grade 1 students, whereby this Grade 1 community is using its *chacham lev* to be *nadiv lev* and ensure that for future generations a sacred place exists in our school.

The Torah tells us that, in the ancient story, the *mishkan* was covered by a cloud by day and by fire at night, showing that God's presence filled the *mishkan* as a beacon for all of *B'nei Yisrael's* journeys through the desert. We have made our classroom into a beacon—a present-day sacred space for our students' daily journey through the 21st-century world. This project is a delight for me as an educator. It is a perfectly integrated process in which the children engage actively in all stages, sometimes independently, other times collaboratively. It incorporates metacognitive development with the children continually tasked to remember, reflect, and record. It synthesizes so much learning and all is sourced from text. In the end, we have the ultimate prize: a marvellous space in which to live and work as a warm, committed, and supportive community, a true sanctuary that is manifest to our students.

Heidi Friedman is a long-time teacher at Toronto Heschel, and now Director of Teacher Mentoring. She is also a Heschel parent.

In the class community, students contribute individual skills and collective spirit.

How to Live

ON EDUCATION, SUKKOT, AND THE WORLD

BY CHEN TANNENBAUM DOMANOVITZ

That's the way to live: to stick your hand
into the infinite outside
of the world, turn the outside inside out
—Yehudah Amichai, “My Children Grew”

At Heschel, this is the way to learn: to help our students step out of their usual way of being and reflect on their life from a different perspective. We want them to observe what is around them through the lens of the great Jewish ideas. We believe that it's important for their growth that they have the chance to do this.

We want students to feel accustomed to using important big ideas in daily life. We ask them to reach “into the infinite outside /of the world, turn the outside inside out,” to flip questions that are eternal into their personal inner world. We do this because fresh perspectives from outside ourselves provide the opportunity to consider life in different ways. We are teaching our students how to re-evaluate what they find, how to choose what to change, and how to know what to protect.

In our lives as adults, we don't always have the possibility to look at the world from different angles. The festival of Sukkot is the once-a-year chance that Judaism offers for us to do this; we can change our place—leave our home and go into the sukkah—and alter our point of view. The Mishnah, the Oral Law written down, tells us, “For seven days a person makes his ark permanent and his house temporary” (Mishna Sukkah 2:9). A portable, transitional booth becomes our home, but it is a home that is not completely closed, and not impervious to wind, rain, or the chirping of birds. Once a year we are to allow the outside world into our private space. We make this flip.

Throughout Judaic text and Jewish literature, our sagas suggest many interpretations of the holiday of Sukkot. In our Grade 6 Mishnah Studies at the Heschel School, we choose to examine the festival through the framework of

the Talmudic debate over whether the children of Israel left slavery and physically lived in portable booths, “in real Sukkot,” or in “clouds of glory,” referring to the protective clouds that travelled with the Israelites, B'nei Yisrael, in the desert.

The Torah tells us:

You shall live in booths seven days; all citizens in Israel shall live in booths, in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt—I, your God יהוהי. (Leviticus 23:42–43)

The words do seem to communicate that the reason we dwell in a sukkah today is in order to remember how B'nei Yisrael lived in temporary dwellings as they escaped slavery. However, when we read the Mishna, Talmudic scholars and later commentators reveal a dispute.

The Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 11b, states:

“I made the children of Israel to reside in sukkot” [in reference to Leviticus 23:43]; these booths were clouds of glory, this is the statement of Rabbi Eliezer. Rabbi Akiva says, “They established for themselves actual sukkot.”

On the one hand, we find a written memory of “real sukkot”—tangible structures that one can sit inside. The other describes a memory of “clouds of glory”—air, wind, and water that we cannot touch or hold. We can appreciate what physical booths imply: that we remember vulnerability and transition. If B'nei Yisrael left on “clouds of glory,” how would we memorialize untouchable plumes or pillars of moisture in our practice on Sukkot? What might this reference to clouds mean?

As with many disagreements in the ancient sources, in the end we find our way through them by saying there are not two parallel paths that never meet but rather two complementary paths that enrich each other. To celebrate and remember the Exodus, we replicate physical structures that shape our memory using tangible rules and details. But, we need also to feel the spirit of our memory and sense the ephemeral meaning of the festival of Sukkot. Without tangible structures we would only have a sense of remembrance of spirit that, like clouds, may disperse and fade, and without the memory of protective clouds we are left with a simple booth, a debate about height and width, and nothing to give it meaning. One is form, the other is substance. Perhaps we learn they need each other.

How does a sukkah connect to education? And where do the clouds fit it? The path here at Toronto Heschel these past years has been to teach through “big ideas.”

Israeli education researcher, Professor Yoram Harpaz, writes about the need to teach students “big ideas” and he defines them as notions that constitute our preferred culture. They are “big” in two ways: first, each encompasses a wide conceptual network that establishes an important understanding and, second, each emerges from other significant ideas which they then extend in new directions. Harpaz defines the core of his conceptualization to be that a “big idea” helps someone to better understand their world and that to achieve a new understanding, the big idea often undermines previous assumptions and sensibilities. He suggests that a big idea may stem from a conceptual tradition, but shakes it up and opens it to seeing something new.¹

And what is meant when we say “understanding the world?” According to Harpaz, a “world” is the set of things that worry us or should worry us. As educators who want to teach for understanding, it is incumbent on us to help students clarify what concerns them personally; we must involve them in the pursuit to expand and deepen their personal consciousness.

All year long at Toronto Heschel, we present our students with large and new interconnected themes and patterns of ideas. Through all the various academic disciplines and educational methods at play, we connect students to big ideas that become relevant and meaningful to them.

In our study of the Mishnaic text, Mesechet Sukkah, we ask our students to shift their gaze and reflect on the sukkah in a new way. We do want them to understand the rules of the Mishnah for building and sitting in a sukkah and to appreciate how this protects our memory of the Exodus and desert wandering, but also, we use the moment to challenge their literal minds.

We want their familiar notion of the little booth to blossom into something new, thereby expanding their consciousness of Sukkot. We want them to explore and wonder at the interplay of spirit and matter in our Jewish lives. Great Talmudic thinkers demonstrate how memories of “the clouds of glory” and of “the physical sukkah” cannot exist one without the other; we discover how the tangible helps to structure our remembrance while memory has no meaning if we cannot sense the why.

I close with special thanks to Dr. Rachael Turkienicz and our “Text and Context” teacher study group at The Toronto Heschel for this inspiration.

¹ הבנה מיוחדת: הארות על הבנה וחינה להבנה, דוד הדינור, פ”ח, 1, אוקטובר 3102, עמ’ 30–37.

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We connect students to big ideas that become relevant and meaningful to them.

My Children Grew

by Yehuda Amichai

My children grew and flourished around
tears and laughter
like fruit, like houses, but the tears and the
laughter
stayed inside the kernel, just as they were.
Our Father, Our King!
That's all for today on fathers and kings.
Go, children I begot: get yourselves into the
next century,
when the tears and the laughter will
continue, just as they were.
I remember giving them a stern warning:
“Never, never stick your hand out the
window of a moving bus.”
Once we were on a bus and my little girl
piped up, “Daddy, that guy
stuck his hand into the outside!”
That's the way to live: to stick your hand
into the infinite outside
of the world, turn the outside inside out,
the world into a room and God into a
little soul
inside the infinite body.

כך לחיות: על חינוך וסוכה ועולם

מאת חן טננבאום דומנוביץ

כך לחיות: להכניס יד לתוך החוץ האין-סופי... של העולם ולהפך את החוץ לפנים (יהודה עמיחי)

כך ללמוד: ב"השל" אנחנו מבקשים מהתלמידים והתלמידות שלנו לצאת מהיום-יום שלהם ולהסתכל על העולם מזווית שונה. אנחנו רוצים לעזור להם להתבונן בעולם דרך הרעיונות היהודיים הגדולים - להכניס את היד לתוך העולם האינסופי הזה ולהפוך את החוץ לפנים— להכניס את אותם רעיונות לתוך עולמם הפנימי. אנחנו עושים זאת כי אנחנו מאמינים שנקודת מבט שונה מאפשרת לנו להסתכל על חיינו בצורה קצת אחרת—לבחון אותם, להעריך אותם מחדש, לבחור מה לשנות. אנחנו רוצים לתת לתלמידים ולתלמידות שלנו את ההזדמנות לעשות את כל אלה.

כאנשים בוגרים, לא תמיד יש לנו אפשרות להתבונן על העולם מזווית אחרת. חג הסוכות הוא הזדמנות שהיהדות מעניקה לנו לעשות זאת מדי בשנה. המשנה אומרת לנו "כל שבעת ימים אדם עושה סכתו קבע וביתו ארעי" (מסכת סוכה, פרק ב', משנה ט'). שבוע בשנה יש לנו הזדמנות לשנות מקום—לצאת מהבית אל הסוכה—ולשנות נקודת מבט. הסוכה היא הבית שלנו למשך שבוע, אבל זהו בית שאינו סגור לגמרי, אינו אטום לרוח ולגשם ולציוצי הציפורים. שבוע בשנה אנחנו מצויים לתת לעולם שבחוץ להיכנס אל תוך עולמנו הפרטי. נקודת המבט שבחרנו להתבונן דרכה על מסכת סוכה בלימודי המשנה ב"השל" היא המחלוקת בין "ענני כבוד" ל"סוכות ממש" - "כי בסוכות הושבתי את בני ישראל ענני כבוד היו, דברי ר' אליעזר. ר"ע אומר, סוכות ממש עשו להם". (בבלי, סוכה יא, ע"ב).

החומש אומר לנו: בַּסֶּכֶת תֵּשֶׁב

החומש אומר לנו: בַּסֶּכֶת תֵּשֶׁבוּ שְׁבַעַת יָמִים כְּלִי־הָאֶזְרָח בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל וְיֵשֶׁב בַּסֶּכֶת: לְמַעַן יִדְעוּ דְרֹתֵיכֶם כִּי בַסֶּכֶת הוֹשַׁבְתִּי אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּהוֹצִיאִי אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם: (ויקרא, פרק כ"ג, פסוקים מב'-מג'). אנחנו יושבים בסוכה כדי לזכור את בני ישראל שישבו בסוכות ביציאת מצרים. אבל אם בני ישראל ישבו בענני כבוד, איך זוכרים עננים?

כשקוראים את המשנה דרך הפרספקטיבה של חכמי התלמוד ופרשנים מאוחרים יותר, נפרשת בינינו המחלוקת בין שתי תפיסות של סוכות: הזיכרון של "ענני כבוד", שכמו עננים אי אפשר לגעת או להחזיק בהם, הם בעיקר אוויר, רוח, ומולם—הזיכרון של "סוכות ממש"—מבנה פיזי, מוחשי, שאפשר לגעת בו, אפשר לשבת בו. אז מה זוכרים? כמו הרבה מחלוקות במקורות, בסופו של דבר ניתן לומר שאין פה שני שילובים מקבילים אלא שני נתיבים משלימים. אנחנו זקוקים למבנה הפיזי כדי לעצב זיכרון מוחשי יותר, כזה שיש לו כללים וחוקים, ואנחנו צריכים את הזיכרון שברוח כדי ליצוק משמעות בעולם הפיזי. בלי המבנה המוחשי נישאר רק עם הרוח, שהיא, כמו ענן, עלולה להתפוגג ולהיעלם. בלי זכרון העננים, נישאר רק עם מבנה פיזי שאין מאחוריו משמעות—נישאר עם ויכוחים על גובה ורוחב, אבל בלי הבנה של המשמעות מאחוריהם.

ואיך סוכה קשורה אל המעשה החינוכי? כפי שנאמר, הישיבה בסוכה היא הזדמנות לשינוי של נקודת המבט. חוקר החינוך הישראלי פרופסור יורם הרפז כותב על הצורך ללמוד את התלמידים "רעיונות גדולים". רעיונות גדולים הם, להגדרתו, רעיונות שמכוננים את התרבות—כל רעיון גדול מכיל בתוכו רשתתbig המועדפת עלינו. הרעיונות הם גדולים בשני מובנים:— כל רעיון כזה הוא רעיון מרכזי בתרבות שלנו, great, מושגית רחבה שמכוננת הבנה, וגם הוא נובע מרעיונות גדולים אחרים והוא מוביל אל רעיונות גדולים נוספים. הרפז מוסיף נדבך חשוב ומרכזי להמשגה שלו—רעיון גדול הוא רעיון שמסייע לאדם להבין טוב יותר את עולמו. כדי להגיע להבנה כזו, רעיון גדול מערער את השכל הישן, הוא נובע ממסורת רעיונית אך מטלטל ומפתח אותה—הוא מצייע להסתכל עליה מנקודת מבט אחרת. ומהו עולם? על פי הרפז, עולם הוא מכלול הדברים שמדאיגים אותנו או שראוי שידאיגו אותנו. אנחנו, כמורים ומורות המחנכים את תלמידינו להבנה, צריכים לעזור לתלמידים ולתלמידות להבין את עולמם—להבין את מכלול הדברים שמדאיגים ומערבים אותם ולנסות להרחיב ולהעמיק את העולם הזה—לכוון אותם לדברים שראוי שידאיגו ויערבו אותם¹. פילוסופיית הלימוד שלנו ב"השל" סובבת כולה סביב רעיונות גדולים. בכל שלב בשנה אנחנו מציגים לתלמידים ולתלמידות שני רעיונות גדולים ומחברים אותם לעולם דרך הדיסציפלינות השונות. כך אנחנו עושים גם בלימוד מסכת סוכה: אנחנו מבקשים מהתלמידים והתלמידות לשנות את נקודת מבטם ולהסתכל על הסוכה מזווית קצת אחרת—לנסות ולהבין איך החוקים והכללים שנותנת לנו המשנה לגבי בניית הסוכה והישיבה בה מאפשרים לנו לשמר את זכרון יציאת מצרים, את זכרון ההליכה במדבר. אנחנו מבקשים לערער את קו החשיבה של השכל הישן ולטלטל את רעיון הסוכה המוכר להם וכך להרחיב את עולמם ולהדגיש בפניהם את השילוב בין חומר לרוח בחייהם היהודיים. להראות להם שהזיכרון של "ענני כבוד" והזיכרון של "סוכות ממש" לא יכולים להתקיים זה בלעדי זה: ההיבט המוחשי נחוץ לנו על מנת שנוכל להמשיך ולזכור, ומאידך אין משמעות לזיכרון מבלי להבין מדוע עלינו לזכור.

"כל שבעת ימים אדם עושה סכתו קבע..." - הסוכה שאנחנו בונים בסוכות היא מבנה שאינו סגור, כזה המאפשר לנו להכניס את החוץ, את העולם, לתוכו. המעשה החינוכי שאנו עושים כשאנחנו מלמדים על סוכות הוא כזה המאפשר לנו להפוך את החוץ לפנים. כאשר אנחנו מאווררים את תפיסתם של הילדים ומשנים את נקודת המבט שלהם, אנחנו עוזרים להם להכניס את היד לתוך החוץ האינסופי של העולם ולהפוך את החוץ לפנים.

הבנה מיוחסת: הארות על הבנת וחינוך להבנה, חד החינוך: פ"ח, 1, אוקטובר 2013, עמ' 30-37.

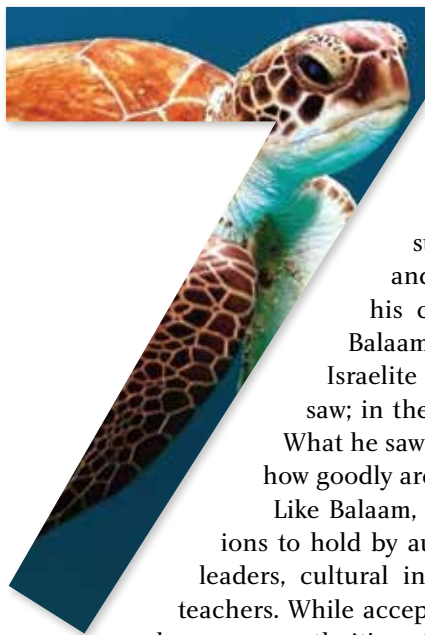
Reading Data

A MATHEMATICAL APPROACH IN GRADE 8

BY CAITY LEHMAN

In an age where the amount of numerically driven information our children receive daily is growing exponentially, we need somehow to help them clearly see what it all means. As teachers, we want to inspire our students to seek meaning in numbers and encourage them to analyze data—that is, how statistics and numbers pertain to our communities. This is an instructive way to start.

In the Book of Numbers (22–24), the story of Balaam, a prophet for hire, and his spin master, the Moabite King Balak, offers interesting instruction in this regard. The



narrative reminds us that drawing conclusions before the research is done is not a new phenomenon. Points of view do shift, depending on where one starts and who frames the project. Balaam was paid to attain a certain result, but, in the end, he resisted and let his own observations inform his conclusions. King Balak wanted Balaam to go to the hilltop above the Israelite encampment and curse what he saw; in the end, Balaam just couldn't do it. What he saw was good, and he said "*Mah Tov, how goodly are your tents.*"

Like Balaam, many people are told what opinions to hold by authority figures such as political leaders, cultural influencers, or even parents and teachers. While accepting another's point of view can be an easy path, it's not a valid route to authenticity. As teachers, we must be thoughtful about how we present new ideas to our students; we must make sure that they think critically about the new material and they must learn how to use evidence that is before them to draw their own conclusions. For educators, it is an important decision: when to teach something deductively through



presenting students with information and ideas, and when to teach inductively, which means allowing students to uncover new understanding for themselves in the course of a learning process.

One Grade 8 math unit at Toronto Heschel illustrates this well. In this unit, we teach the students how to analyze data and then we show them how to use the numbers to delve into a particular question. For example, we ask, "How can statistics help us to understand different kinds of diversity in our communities?"

The first exercise in the math unit helps to answer this question by examining a set of infographics (charts and diagrams) produced by Statistics Canada (StatsCan) for the 2016 Canadian census. The infographics relate to the diversity of languages, religion, and youth attitudes across the country. But before the students even see the infographics, before we ask them to identify and interpret the census results, we invite them to make a few predictions about what they believe the numbers will show. We ask, "What percentage of Torontonians do you think identify themselves as visible minorities?" Ultimately, a comparison of the students' initial assumptions against the facts later revealed by StatsCan will deliver a valuable teaching moment; the juxtaposition will demonstrate how data, used properly, can open new perspectives and offer insights that are very different from those that their personal experiences and presuppositions had initially suggested.

We then take the students to a second study of immigration in Ontario that leads through layered data sets; the exercise reveals how adding new numbers provides nuance to an investigation. The students first study a chart showing the number of immigrants arriving in Ontario each decade over the last 60 years; they see that there is a clear change in Ontario's population. A second graph then isolates immigration in a single year and indicates those new immigrants' countries of origin. A final

stacked bar graph introduces a new dimension and reveals the shifts in the number of immigrants from each country over time. Each set of data refines the information and the students are tasked to look for patterns and develop conclusions. The process introduces them to the wider context in which the statistics were developed and lets them contemplate how to approach such large sets of data in order to extract and interpret particular content.

The next step is to apply the analysis to the students' own experience. They compose and present a survey of thoughtful questions to other students across various Toronto communities. The project doubles as a great opportunity to practice initiative, to bring intentionality to the act of collecting data, and to forecast with an open mind.

When the results are in, the students look for patterns in the numbers and describe the correlations they discover using mathematical thinking and terminology. Their final responsibility is to present their findings in a way that articulates their newfound awareness of the complexities of data representation or misrepresentation; they must explain clearly and explicitly what they did and why they did it that way. The project has led our Grade 8 students through a structured process that reveals how perspectives are developed and opinions are formed from inside our own unique experiences, a first step in an awareness of bias.

Our students encounter statistics in the news, in school, on social media, and amongst friends. Leading them through a process that dissects how a news story was constructed and what story those numbers can therefore tell or not tell empowers them to look with open eyes at the information streaming past them. It builds their ability to perceive with clarity and intention, and to see what they did not see before.

Teachers today have to shoulder the responsibility for teaching students that data can either cloud or clarify meaning. Our math unit in Grade 8 helps students absorb how crucial it is today to be cognizant of this risk and ambiguity; analyzing a data-driven perspective step by step lets them experience the risk for themselves. Exploring statistics is not just about learning how to construct and interpret graphs, it's also about reading the data, asking the human questions, and developing perspectives that incorporate empathy, open-mindedness, curiosity, and appreciation.

Caity Lehman has been a teacher at The Toronto Heschel School and now develops curriculum at the Lola Stein Teacher Learning and Performance Studio.

Image credits: sea turtle: Wexor Tmg; koala: Kerin Gedge; lion: Omer Salom; Parthenon: Spencer Davis; volcano: usgs.gov. All images Unsplash.



Teachers today have to shoulder the responsibility for teaching students that data can either cloud or clarify meaning.

THE PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE



A lush garden scene with a stone path leading to two wooden chairs under a large tree. The path is made of flat stones and is surrounded by various green plants and foliage. A large tree with dense green leaves dominates the left side of the frame, with its branches extending over the path. The background is filled with more trees and bushes, creating a sense of a deep, wooded garden.

My Garden Is Good for Me

BY JOAN GARSON, O.C.

The engagement, satisfaction, and deep joy I experience when working in my garden are irreplaceable parts of my life.

These feelings do not arise when I wander in a beautiful garden created by someone else. That beauty may move me to tears. It is, however, a different experience than the creative challenge I feel in my own backyard. The birds seem to sing more loudly, the butterflies are more colourful, and the play of light and shadow is mesmerizing to me in my garden. And the work is never, ever, done.

In my busy and very satisfying daily life, I am constantly linked to my phone and computer, and to the tasks that I perform. Only in the garden is that link severed. Time passes without me noticing. The pressures of troubling times, worrying news, and deadlines dissipate. I engage with the tasks at hand: weeding, planting, moving plants, aiming for an effect.

I am very lucky to have discovered the gifts my garden gives to me, year after year. I could simply acknowledge that marvellous good fortune and rush back outside. When pressed to think more deeply about how I can so joyfully step aside from activist roles and daily demands to weed and plant, the beginnings of answers emerge.

In a busy and task-filled life, I find few outlets for creativity that are not tied to a political goal or developmental purpose. The garden gives me this means of expression, and, in return, it demands a commitment for the long term; trees take years to grow; plants thrive or dwindle over time. The desire to create beauty is never satisfied and gardening is endlessly challenging; a challenge I impose on myself. No external force requires me to do the work. The task is not complete at the end of the summer or indeed the decade, so long as it is meaningful to me.

Gardening is a time for private thought and reflection. The hard physical labour seems to lead to a freeing of

My other pursuits direct themselves from my heart to others; the meaning I find in my garden work directs itself back to me.

my mind, and I find that at the end of an hour or two I have been reflecting on an issue productively while at the same time struggling with an insect infestation.

Inevitably larger questions arise as well. How marvellous that there are worms and bees and colours and sunlight. What a miracle that plants want to grow. How inexplicable that we appreciate beauty. How can the world be this way? The sense of wonder the garden engenders in me is a gift, just like the colour or contour of a leaf.

Gardeners form a small and joyful community. While most gardening is an isolated activity day by day, we can come together to appreciate each other's work, to sympathize, and to learn.

One of the first interactions between God and humanity was in the Garden of Eden. Clearly, the tie to nature I feel in my garden is a long-standing one, and the creativity that I explore in my garden is perhaps in part fulfilling a partnership created at the very beginning—that is to say, that the sources of the desire to tend and nurture are profound.

To me, it only matters that the beauty cultivated in my garden is resonant to me. Unlike my other pursuits, which direct themselves from my heart to others, the meaning I find in my garden work directs itself back to me. It is all about how I cherish the juxtaposed colours, how the moving shapes and shadows of buds and stems enthrall me. I do love when visitors walk up to my front door and enthuse over their saunter through my front-yard foliage, how it makes them feel relaxed, even happy, but I don't do it for them. I do it for me. I can't explain why the garden is so good for me, but, in the end, I will hold onto this, no matter what.

Joan Garson received the Order of Canada this summer recognizing a career-long devotion to Jewish community service in Canada and Israel. She is serving a third year as a community director on The Toronto Heschel School board.

Vermeer invites the viewer to co-create the story.

All the Vermeers

BY JOE KANOFSKY

Having seen what now can't be seen, I'm on a quest to see more, to see better, and to understand better what I'm looking at—and what I'm looking for.

News of the theft of Vermeer's *The Concert* from Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum caught my attention in 1990; I had seen the painting as an undergraduate. In 2002 I took my family to the Prado Museum in Madrid to see Picasso's *Guernica* (my out-of-date guidebook not advising that it had relocated to another museum 20 years prior) and became intrigued by an exhibit there of eight Vermeers. Fifteen years later I was again captivated, this time by a feeling of light emanating forth out of Vermeer's *Officer and Laughing Girl* at The Frick Collection in New York City. I decided then and there to see all of Vermeer's works. It's proving easier and yet harder than I had imagined, in orders of magnitude more rewarding and engaging than expected.

The paintings of Johannes Vermeer of Delft are precious few—no more than three dozen—and they are scattered around the world in public and private collections from Washington, DC, to Tokyo. What is it about this mid-17th century painter that captures the world's attention and leads to so many books imagining the artist's backstory, including a popular novel and then film that fantasizes about the *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, which resides quietly in the Mauritshuis in The Hague? What is it that brought 650,000 art lovers from 113 countries around the world to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam this past spring for an exhibit of 28 of Vermeer's paintings, and even more visitors to the museum's virtual exhibit on its website?

Is it the relative scarcity of Vermeer's works? A small museum like the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia is home to 181 works by Renoir. The Picasso Museum in Barcelona alone houses 4,200 of the Spaniard's works. There are hundreds of Rembrandts—his etchings and sketches number in the thousands—with the Rijksmuseum housing the largest collection. By comparison, the handful attributed to Vermeer are precious few, and even some of those are doubted. But rarity can't be the only attraction.

Is it his use of light? The unadorned back wall in the kitchen in *The Milkmaid* is a virtuoso class in how we see light.

No, it isn't scarcity or light. It's preciousness.

Vermeer paints the experience of seeing. Is he not, then, merely capturing a record of his subjects on canvas? In the brickwork of the buildings in *A Little Street*, or in the clouds rolling in over the town of Delft and the Schie River in *View of Delft* and the play of sunrise on the drops of water on boats and on various types of roofs, the viewer gets a hyperreal sense of "being there," experiencing the scenery, feeling the anxiety of the clouds rolling by.

The women whom Vermeer paints are living their quiet moments, unmediated, and, for the most part without male counterparts—and when men are there, it's for baser pursuits. Vermeer's subjects are well-heeled women caught in moments of quiet reflection, reading or composing letters, donning jewelry, playing music, or making lace. Almost all are oblivious to the artist and to the audience's gaze, and the viewer is allowed to observe them as

they are: completely and unselfconsciously absorbed in the task at hand. Their expressions of self-regard, imagining what a correspondent might be meaning, or how they might express themselves on paper, or how the music they are playing may move them. The intimations are very close and on display, however ambiguously. And that may very well be the point.

Because Vermeer invites the viewer to co-create the story. There are so many plausible ways to interpret what is going on with a woman who is reading a letter, holding a balance, or opening a window in the morning. Each of the multiple understandings finds support in the cues and clues in the painting.

Girl with a Pearl Earring arguably invites the widest range of readings. There is no background to contextualize or locate the portrait, and the subject's headdress and pearl earring are both out of the ordinary for the time and place; perhaps for any time and place. But what is inviting to the viewer is the turn of her head, the gaze of her eyes, the parting of her lips. What is she saying? To whom is she responding? Is this the beginning of a conversation, or the middle? Who is she? One critic writes that Vermeer "not only seeks out and isolates but takes possession of our gaze, we can scarcely separate what is visible on the canvas from what happens inside us as we look at it. Nor do we really want to."¹

Vermeer's paintings offer us so many cues—an inclined head, an intense gaze, the suggestion of speech on opened lips—with often contradictory messages prompted by the detailed paintings in the background. We are invited in, welcomed, bidden to narrate the story as it is unfolding; we become part of the process of creating the work of art. In this sense, the paintings of Vermeer are ongoing creations—we look out from our experiences and onto theirs—and play a small part in the dramas Vermeer proposes.

Having seen the painting in Boston before it was stolen, I have a reasonable, and perhaps rare, bid to see all the Vermeers. Fortuitously obtaining tickets to the historic 2023 Amsterdam exhibit at the Rijksmuseum brought me within seeing all but two of his works—an entrée into a state of seeing, listening, imagining, and holding in my mind as many plausibilities of this creator's oeuvre as possible, all at once. I feel I could use more of this talent—to be able to entertain many possibilities at the same time, simultaneously welcoming what seem to be their mutual contradictions. For Vermeer to create these wondrous canvases that invite even more than they depict is his stroke of mastery, as Goethe wrote in a sonnet: "It is in restraint that the master's prowess is most evident."

¹ Edward Snow, *A Study of Vermeer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 3.

Joe Kanofsky, Ph.D., is Rabbi of Kehillat Shaarei Torah in Toronto.



Above: detail from *The Milkmaid*, Johannes Vermeer

Below: detail from *A Little Street*, Johannes Vermeer

Background: detail from *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, Johannes Vermeer





My Voice My Jewish Lens

LEADERSHIP THROUGH
SELF-PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY

BY JUDITH LEITNER

I have often been asked what I wanted to prove by my photographs. The answer is, I don't want to prove anything. They prove to me, and I am the one who gets the lesson.

—Lisette Model,
photographer, teacher, humanist

Morah Yonina Figdor

“My work from the past three months has been to focus on exploring and revealing the emotional human experience of different Torah sources. The different texts of study helped direct my work in finding the meaning within myself and how I interpret those texts on a personal level. What surprised the most about this process was the emotional connection I had to the meaning behind the images. I hope my portrayal of these texts touches the viewer—as it turns their experience from an observer to an experiencer.”

My Voice My Jewish Lens is a series of six biweekly workshops that integrate the arts of self-portrait photography with Judaic text learning and advanced teacher learning.

The series is a professional development course in which educators at The Toronto Heschel School engage creatively with the essential question: “Who am I—as a Jewish educator, teammate, mentor, friend, leader, lifetime learner—at Toronto Heschel?”

The photographic component explores five themes essential to the craft of photography, specifically, self-portraiture, in tandem with the development of curatorial skills.

The Judaic component includes text sources from across Jewish history and traditions.

The course is designed intentionally to invigorate participants' creative process, enlivening both self-image and identity as a “teacher-leader.”

A self-portrait is created when the photographer's eye and lens turn inwards. It is a record of oneself, seen, experienced, and revealed. In the deepest sense, it is an expression of what one feels about one's life in all of its complexity.

Mazal tov to our nine courageous artists—“Jewish Lensers” all—who continue to inspire me to look deep within and to be an eloquent communicator of visual stories that truly matter.

Judith Leitner co-founded The Toronto Heschel School in 1996 and served 25 years as its art teacher, then Director of Integrated Art. She has retired from the school, is now a photographer and creator/facilitator of the corporate leadership development series, My Voice My Lens: Leadership Through Self-Portrait Photography.



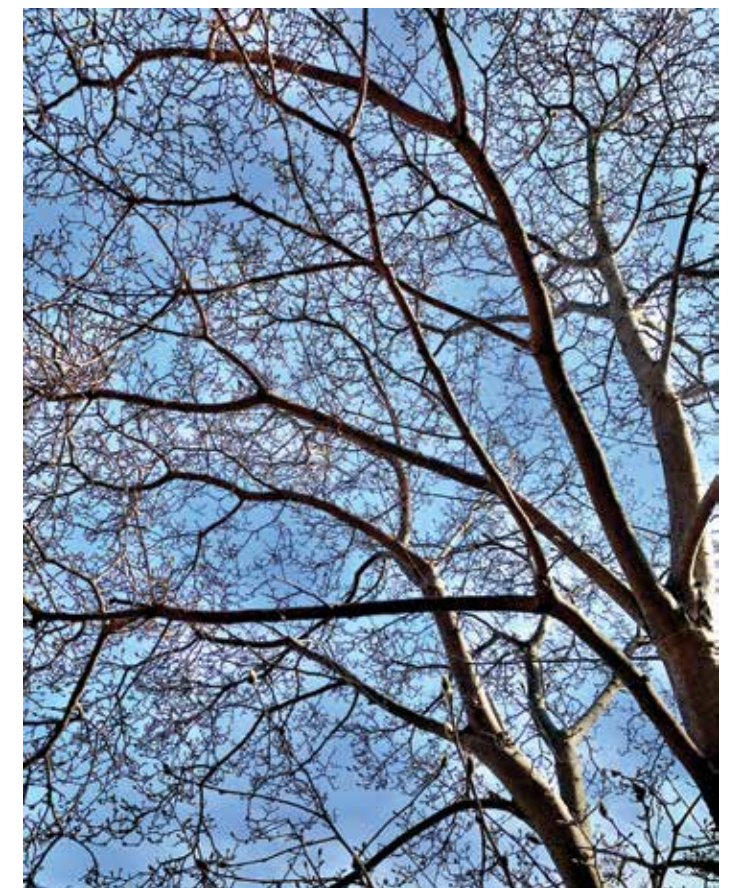
Moreh Liraz Miller

“I think and know that the choice between ‘light and shadow’ and ‘light and darkness’ is in my hands. Can I turn off the light or illuminate the darkness? Even so: what is light; what is it made of? What is darkness? Is it a lack of light or is it another substance?”

I have no answers, but it's in my hands.”

Moreh Aiden Orzech

“I reach out beyond the foundation of the trunk to bring in new ideas, experiences, and perspectives.”



Good Books

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHILDREN AND THE PEOPLE WHO LOVE THEM

BY GAIL BAKER & TZIPORAH COHEN

Blanket by Ruth Ohi (Groundwood Books, 2022)

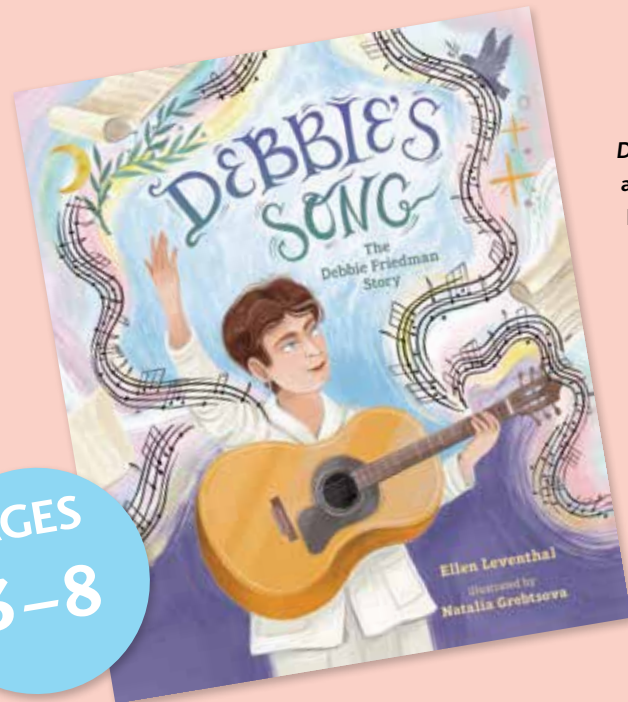
In this wordless picture book, the world outside Cat's window is brightly coloured but Cat feels grey and sad. Cat hides under Blanket, alone and quiet, until along comes Dog. Respecting Cat's need for space, Dog reads a book next to Blanket-covered Cat, initiating conversation only when Cat indicates readiness by moving a bit closer to Dog. Tentatively, Cat invites Dog under Blanket, with illustrations conveying the many emotions Cat feels. A good listener, Dog eventually engages Cat in play, and the two use Blanket to build a fort and create a fun flashlight-finger puppet show. The limited palette of Cat's low mood blooms into full colour as Dog's kindness draws Cat out. Through her images, Ohi sensitively depicts those times we want to hide from the world and how a friend's kindness may draw us out.



AGES
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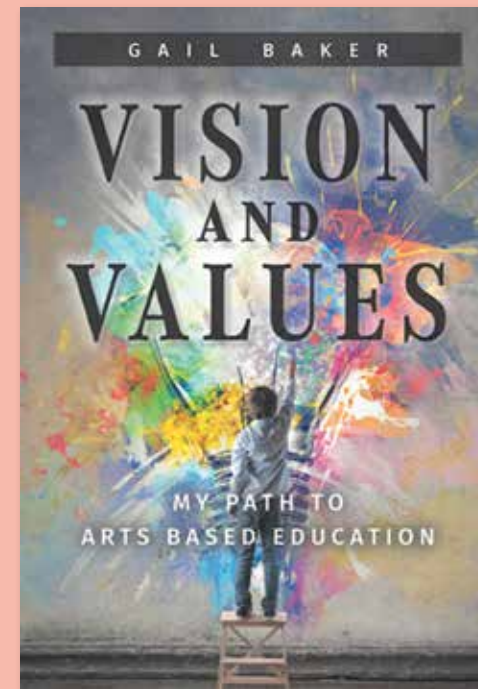
Debbie's Song: The Debbie Friedman Story by Ellen Leventhal and illustrated by Natalia Grebtsova (Kar-Ben Publishing, 2023)

In this lyrically written picture book biography, we learn that Debbie Friedman, the beloved Jewish songwriter and singer, always had music "bubbling and swirling inside of her." She called it her superpower. As a young girl, she loved singing the blessings over the Shabbat candles with her grandmother, but it was teaching at summer camp and living on kibbutz that showed Debbie the power of song to build community and fill the world with joy. Returning home from Israel, she was dismayed by the lack of joy and participation among the congregants of her synagogue. Her solution? Learn to write music and lyrics! She translated the prayers, combining English and Hebrew, and putting their words to melodies that could be meaningful to all. Not everyone supported Debbie's work, but she didn't stop. Soon schools, synagogues, summer camps, and community venues were singing and dancing to Debbie's songs. Her music bubbled and swirled everywhere! No one felt alone with Debbie's new music.



AGES
3-8

Gail Baker co-founded The Toronto Heschel School in 1996, serving as Head of School from 2001–2014. Gail is now a grandparent at the school. Tziporah Cohen is a psychiatrist and children's author, and a former Toronto Heschel parent. Her newest picture books are *Afikomen* (Groundwood Books) and *City Beet* (Sleeping Bear Press), both published in March 2023.

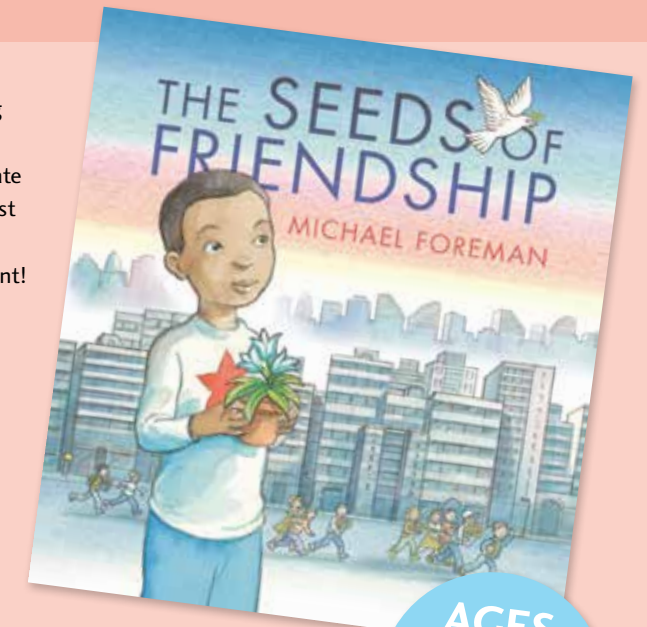


THINK
congratulates
Gail Baker

on the publication of her memoir,
*Vision and Values:
My Path to Arts Based Education*

The Seeds of Friendship by Michael Foreman (Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers, Candlewick Press, 2015)

Young Adam is lonely. He likes his high-rise city apartment, but misses the warm climate and vibrant colours of his homeland, and its elephants and monkeys. When Adam's first snow arrives, he watches children playing in the yard below, too shy to join them. Yet seeing them building a snowman, he can't resist going down to build—a snow elephant! The children are intrigued and, by suppertime, they have created a zoo full of snow animals. At school, Adam delights in the garden, and accepts some of its seeds from his teacher. In the spring, when his window boxes overflow with plants, Adam and his new friends plant seeds throughout the neighbourhood, in all kinds of containers, on rooftops and in empty patches of ground, making a whole city of gardens. Foreman's light watercolours mirror the hope and possibility that are transforming Adam's drab lonely world into a colourful place filled with friendship and opportunity.



AGES
4-8



AGES
11-14

Starfish by Lisa Fipps (Nancy Paulsen Books, 2021)

Despite trying not to stand out, Ellie has been fat-shamed almost her whole life—by her peers, her siblings, and perhaps worst of all, her own mother. The world seems obsessed with weight—especially hers. When her best friend moves away, Ellie feels even more alone, until a new neighbour, Catalina, arrives and doesn't make weight an issue at all. While navigating the cruelty of school and dodging her mother's efforts with strict diets and weight loss doctors, Ellie begins to open up to a therapist—a woman who helps her to see her own worth and stand up to her bullies, even her mom. Fipps narrates in concise, evocative verse that makes the book even harder to put down. Unlike many "fat girl" books, in which redemption comes with losing weight, in *Starfish*, it is the bullies who need to redeem themselves. As it should be.

LOOKING AT THE GOOD THROUGH EYES OF AWE AND WONDER

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