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# THiNK

THE  
LOLA  
STEIN  
INSTITUTE  
JOURNAL

Conversation about Education, Ethics, and Our Children

## ETHICS IN ACTION

TAKEOUT DINNER AS A POLITICAL STAND / SPORTSMANSHIP AND LIFE LESSONS  
WHAT WOULD RABBI HESCHEL SAY NOW? / TRUST AND THE PRESCHOOL EXPERIENCE  
WHEN JUNIOR HIGH SHOWS UP / NATURE AND HUMANITY BREATHING TOGETHER

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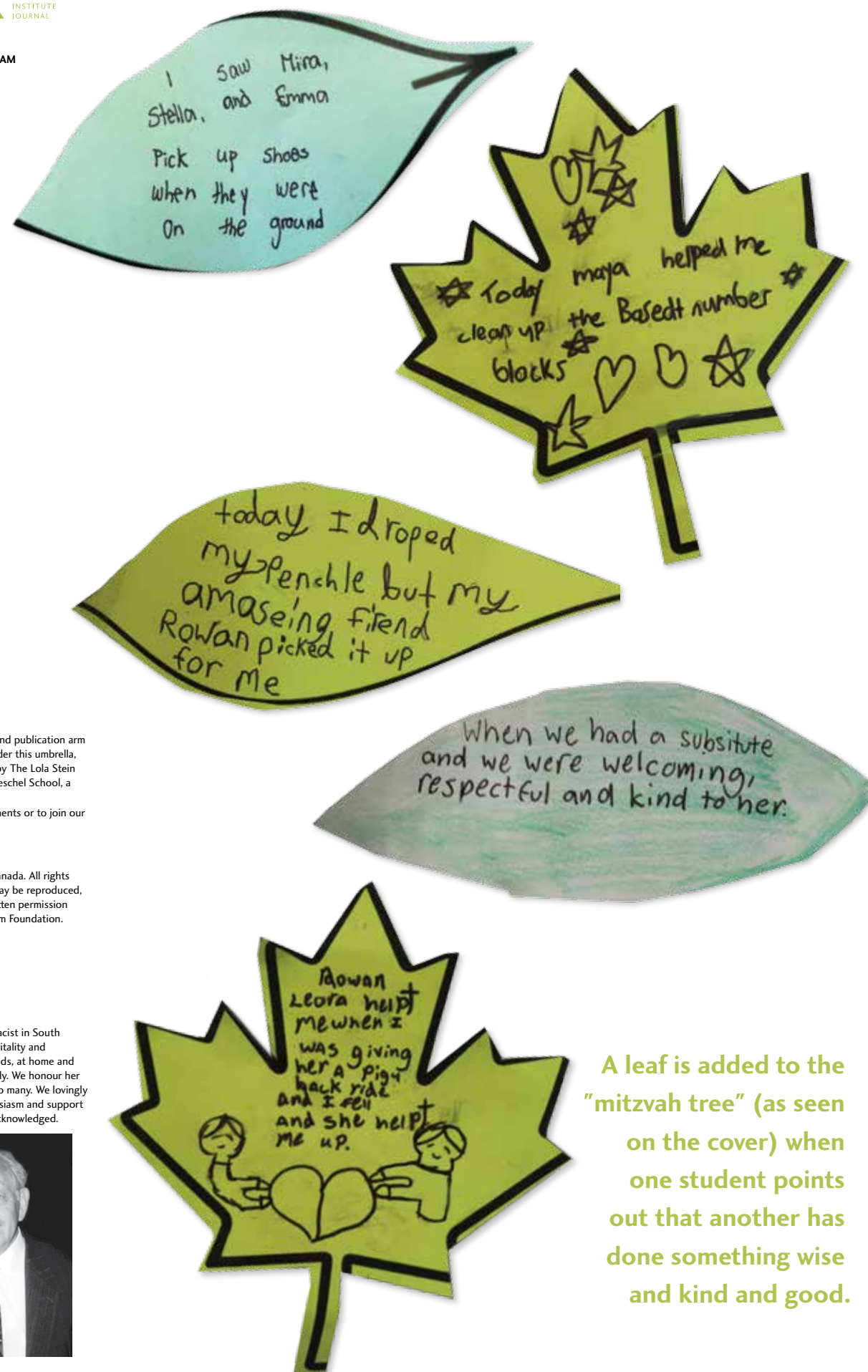
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Lola Stein z"l was an early female pharmacist in South Africa, but her special talent was in hospitality and friendship. She cared for family and friends, at home and abroad, individually, uniquely, and lovingly. We honour her memory in a way that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



A leaf is added to the "mitzvah tree" (as seen on the cover) when one student points out that another has done something wise and kind and good.



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# Putting Ethics into Action

How can parents use ancient Jewish references for family management?

The search is on. Parents in 2024 are looking for levers to pull to ensure their children have a meaningful and spiritual Jewish upbringing. They want them to live this kind of good life.

In a recent focus group discussion, one mom asked for explicit directions on how to embed the love of Judaism in her children. Reliance on traditional moral authority institutions is faltering, perhaps because information on almost anything seems to exist in a cloud unrelated to the puffy white heavenly kind. Yet her question reveals that Jewish wisdom, once the domain of organized sources, is still sought. What can parents latch onto in the midst of their skepticism? How can they build confidence to rely on their own merit as guardians of their children's future? Where do they look?

Before ancient texts became books, which, by the way, Plato and Socrates begrudged, fearing they'd ruin memory skills, and, before books became digital events, which are similarly decried by book lovers today, there were people, ideas, and events from which to learn. Words inked on Torah scrolls reveal the stories, regulations, and revelations that form Judaism. But getting back to the mom's question, how *can* parents translate ancient Jewish references into family management plans?

To begin an answer, THINK looks at embodiment.

Embodiment means "the tangible or visible form of an idea, quality, or feeling"; "the representation or expression of something in a tangible or visible form." Tangible means "perceptible by touch; clear, definite; real."<sup>1</sup>

A great example is Sara Schnirer's creation of Bais Yaakov Schools in early 20th-century Poland when Jewish girls were becoming disengaged and disaffected with Jewish life. Their community dictated girls not be educated. Schnirer was so committed to Jewish education for girls that she staged a "revolution in the name of tradition," which is the subtitle of Naomi Seidman's fascinating 2019 telling of this story.<sup>2</sup> When advocating for her ideas was unsuccessful, Schnirer staged sewing circles featuring "girls only" learning; the circles let girls earn a living and kindle flickers of knowledge, which lit interest, ignited commitment, and, ultimately, women's learning caught like wildfire. (See The Bais Yaakov Project at <https://thebaisyaakovproject.religion.utoronto.ca/>.) Girls in 1917 had to feel what learning meant; their community had to experience it as okay. Schnirer's initiative was countercultural, counterintuitive to standard Jewish practice, but conveyed tangibly what education meant. Schnirer personified the interplay of modernity and tradition; her sewing circles embodied the will to learn. I wonder whether text study made the difference or if learning was launched when girls saw in the flesh what one woman could do.

Schnirer stuck with the norm that girls had to earn to support their families and she added Jewish learning to it. Parents today can also deliver Jewish inspiration in tandem with unrelated goals: Schools and camps with positive Jewish programming are known methods but also penetrating are consistent family gatherings embodying unity and warm togetherness around Friday night candles, challah, and wine, and happy household preparations for Jewish holidays.

Abraham Joshua Heschel personified the integration of the spiritual with earthly living. In *Awe and Wonder*, Greg Beiles reflects on how Rabbi Heschel might respond to the havoc of the Jewish world today. In true Heschel tradition, Heschel School Principal, Alan Rusonik, shares his October 2023 experience leading his junior high to Ottawa in support of Israel. Dani Plant, our Food for Thought columnist, turns to takeout for a change and describes her family's choice to support an Israeli business, showing her sons what response to challenge looks like. She also suggested our journal take this theme to our readers.

Athletic coaches, teachers, and parents are the templates children see. In the Learning Studio, Dvora Goodman explains how athletic ethics and school programs can model that what we do is who we are. Early Years Director Andrea Zecharia outlines her strategy to prepare young children for the road ahead; her team builds children's trust and confidence, which opens them to becoming lifelong learners. Stacie Goldin finds lessons embedded in the actions and interactions of nature and humanity—woodlands and people; Rabbi Nachman of Breslov is back in style.

Abraham Joshua Heschel "felt his legs were praying" when he walked at Selma to support Martin Luther King Jr. and the American Civil Rights movement. Joe Kanofsky describes the practice of prayer as a method to bring the whole body and soul to bear on hope, faith, and good works. Maya Zor interviews Laya Weissberger, who found strength in a school community that epitomized warmth and care. Michelle Landy-Shavim shares a parent education series that couples portions of the Torah with guest speakers who are experts on raising children. Related to this, THINK is also reprising Dr. Jasmine Eliav's 2016 reminder that when parents embody peaceful easy living, it's a gift to their children forever.

There are sources and resources inside and everywhere. Enjoy the search.

Pam

<sup>1</sup> *Cambridge Dictionary*, retrieved March 12, 2024, from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/tangible>.

<sup>2</sup> Naomi Seidman, *Sarah Schnirer and the Bais Yaakov Movement: A Revolution in the Name of Tradition* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019).

Jews connect to Judaism in unique and different ways and there are many doors of connection and opportunity to enter. Toronto Heschel gives its students all the doors. When they become adults they can choose which doors to open and they will have the skills to open them all.

Rachael Turkienicz  
Co-Founder  
Toronto Heschel School

# Israel, Rabbi Heschel, Teachers, and Parents

BY GREG BEILES

We must maintain our children's sense of dignity as young Jewish people, inheritors of a beautiful, joyous, and powerful moral tradition.

Since the shocking Hamas attack on Israel on October 7th 2023, teachers, parents, all of us, have been searching for answers: What do we say to our children, our students? What do we do? How can we help? In the days following the October 7th pogrom, like many of you, I was in shock. I had no words—“Ein milim.” But silence is a form of paralysis. We need guidance. The Toronto Heschel School looks to Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.

Rabbi Heschel was passionate about Israel. As a Holocaust survivor, whose family perished in the Shoah, he saw the State of Israel as a necessary haven for the Jewish people. He admired those who fought in Israel's wars, and admonished American Jewish leaders whose equivocations might weaken conviction for Israel.

Yet for Heschel, Israel was more than a safety haven; it was an ancient and living source for Jewish life and inspiration, “a land where not a spot is visible that is not reflecting an event, a moment.”<sup>1</sup> He saw the modern State of Israel as another miraculous event in Jewish history,

a country where a full Jewish life can be lived in accord with tradition and conscience; where the Sabbath fills the streets, not only the homes; where the language is Hebrew. Every people has a right to its own territory, in which it can develop its own culture and strive for making a contribution to the world out of its own spirit.<sup>2</sup>

Heschel was a Zionist, in the deepest sense of the word: recognizing the uniqueness of Israel for the flourishing expression of the Jewish people: “Out of the land of Zion, come the great teachings of Judaism”—“כי מציון תצא תורה” (“ki mitzion tezei Torah”)—and for Heschel, these teachings derive from the prophets—especially Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah—for their uncompromising moral compass, and stance “that morally speaking there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings.”<sup>3</sup>

While it is difficult to know precisely what Rabbi Heschel would have said after October 7th, it is impossible to imagine that he would not have responded

with absolute anguish at the slaughter of innocent women, men, and children. Given the precision of his own moral compass, he would have discerned the vicious barbaric attacks by Hamas as an unequivocal moral outrage; and acknowledge, as he did during the Six-Day War, the obligation of Israel to defend her citizens from an enemy ideologically dedicated to her destruction.

Yet Heschel never relieved himself of moral responsibility. Moral outrage was never enough. Heschel dedicated his life to action, not just proclamation, to redeem the world from the evils of racism, antisemitism, and groundless violence. If he were alive today, Heschel would not let us ignore the pernicious persistence of antisemitism, nor turn from other forms of racism, including Islamophobia. All racism, for Heschel, was connected.

It is also impossible to imagine a world where Rabbi Heschel would allow us, even in our grief and fear, to divert our eyes from the suffering of the many innocent women, men, and children—Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Israeli, Palestinian, and more—caught up in the terror of war. He would likely push us to look to the deepest sources of violence in the world, which he attributed to human failings of greed and complacency.

Heschel was not a pacifist; he knew war could be tragically necessary, but he never glorified it. He understood war as a failure of humanity. During World War II, he called on us, and I am certain he would again now, to do whatever we might in these challenging times to ensure the integrity of our humanity, grounded in the ancient teachings of Torah and our people.

It has become so evident how deeply committed the Heschel community is to Israel, to the Jewish community, and to the children. Parents and teachers are helping however they can—supporting additional school security, supporting teachers through this difficult time, organizing prayer gatherings, and sending moral and material support to Israeli soldiers. Heschel community members have attended and spoken at rallies in support of Israel and in solidarity with the hostages; they have supported businesses affected by protests; and they have participated in interfaith vigils for peace. Each act is a prayer, an expression of concern, a rejection of complacency, as Heschel and the prophets would demand.

At this time, profound responsibility lies with teachers (and with parents) to ensure the moral and spiritual fortitude of our children. Children, even older ones, may not be as consciously aware as adults are of ongoing events in Israel, yet they are more attuned to our words and feelings (anxiety, fear, courage, empathy) than we often acknowledge. We cannot allow terrorism of the soul to reach them and undermine their love of being Jewish, their attachment to Israel. Our job is to maintain their sense of dignity as young Jewish people, as inheritors of a beautiful, joyous, and powerful moral tradition.

As a Jewish people, we are facing two existential threats: one, of course, to our physical existence as Jews, the other to our moral, spiritual, emotional, intellectual existence. The goal of terrorism is not to kill everyone; it is to terrify everyone. That's why it's called terrorism. Terrorism aims to undermine our morale as a people, make us say it's just not worth it, and give up our peoplehood, our heritage, our Judaism. This is exactly how many other peoples have disappeared over the course of history.

As parents and teachers, we must defend against this. By continuing to teach, speak Hebrew, learn Jewish songs and music, study Torah, practise the virtues of our traditions, teach kindness, and be role models for what it means to be Jewish, we ensure that terrorism of the soul does not reach our children and undermine their love of being Jewish, and their attachment to Israel. Our responsibility is to maintain their sense of dignity as young Jewish people, inheritors of a beautiful, joyous, and powerful moral tradition.

I send a huge thank you to Toronto Heschel teachers and Jewish teachers everywhere for doing just this despite the heartbreaking unforeseen challenges they face. At the school, I look around at walls filled with incredible poetry, glowing artwork, and Judaic projects—all rooted in Jewish learning, sometimes obviously sometimes more subtly—but all revealing תורה תצא תורה. Our teachers are defending the hearts and souls of our children, showing that God is also in this place and we should know it: אכן יש יהוה במקום הזה

Let us pray for families among our Israeli brethren who are in mourning; let us pray for the wounded. Let us pray relentlessly for the hostages. Let us pray for the safety and the success of the Israeli soldiers in the dangerous fraught task of fighting an enemy bent on our destruction. Let us pray for the strength of our teachers and parents caring for the souls of our Jewish children. Let us pray for the many innocent people who are suffering. Let us pray for a speedy end to the war and let us allow ourselves even to pray for lasting peace, as far away as it seems. It is no betrayal nor contradiction to pray for all this and to act where we are most able. God is big, and so may our hearts and our deeds be too.

1 A.J. Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976).

2 A.J. Heschel, *Israel: An Echo of Eternity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987).

3 A.J. Heschel, “The Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement,” in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*, edited by Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1997).

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

JEWISH FOOD FOR THOUGHT

# Time for Takeout

BY DANI PLANT

Our evening meal became an opportunity to support a blockaded restaurant.

There is a phase during childhood where toddlers will respond to every question asked or request made of them with “why.” Toddlers with their “why” questions are like tiny detectives interrogating the mysteries of the universe, one juice box at a time. This is how they learn about the world around them, but also how they somehow make you question everything you ever thought you knew. Luckily, this phase usually ends...eventually. In some cases, however, it can take quite some time. My parents, for example, are still waiting for me to move through it.

My need to understand the “why” is at the core of my ability to make sense of a world that lately feels senseless. Questions like why people do things, why things happen, and who they happen to are the most difficult to answer, because most of the time there simply is no answer. This is where faith can provide comfort and a sense of acceptance to some. Not for me, however. For me it only raises more questions.

My Jewish identity, connection, and beliefs are unwavering, and the times I feel the most connected to my Jewish faith are when I am doing good things for others, but as an adult I still struggle to understand how to put all the pieces and experiences of my life together without knowing the “why.” This all changed when I heard a quote said by Abraham Joshua Heschel, which included the phrase, “I felt my legs were praying.” This was the first time I experienced one of those “a-ha” moments that I heard Oprah constantly talking about in the 1990s. The quote hit me like a ton of self-help books falling off a spiritual shelf in the middle of a Yom Kippur service.

The idea to pray with my feet may not have answered the “why,” but it did provide me with the “how,” which was somehow even more meaningful. It satisfied my need to understand by unlocking a map to navigate my quest. It was through this idea that I realized I had been interpreting the concept of prayer through a very narrow lens.

Prayer and the ways which we speak to God are present in our every thought whether silent or out loud, in every action whether extraordinary or mundane, and in the way we move through the routines of daily life, we just don’t always recognize it as prayer. When we think of another person and their well-being, we are praying for them. When we pick up litter from the ground or recycle our own trash to make a difference in the environment, we are praying for the world. When we cook a meal to nourish ourselves and others, we are feeding more than the body, we are feeding the soul, another form of prayer.

Prayers, however, have gotten a lot louder since October 7th. We can hear them even in silence. We don’t need to look for them, we can see and feel the weight and significance of them inside ourselves and each other nearly every moment of every day. An entire community, each in their own way, has been praying with their feet every single day through thought and actions. An invisible string connecting friends and strangers near and far with an awareness that can be felt in the depths of the soul. This invisible string is how my children learned that the rare occurrence of takeout dinner at our house on a weeknight could represent more than just their mother’s admission of total defeat.

Like most people in October, I was glued to the news to the point where I would have been able to fill in for a sick news anchor on a moment’s notice without being prepped. On one particular morning, multiple local news sources were running a story about anti-Israel protests being held outside a Cafe Landwer in downtown Toronto. I couldn’t shake it. Throughout the day I kept thinking about the owner/manager of the restaurant, who was already carrying at least the same trauma and pain as the rest of the community and now, in addition, was having his/her livelihood threatened and place of work vandalized. I empathized with how that person and the entire

staff must have felt by the end of the weekend, and I hoped they found support within one another.

My thoughts got louder over the course of the day and simply thinking them was not enough. I felt helpless. My need to know “why” had never been more intense, but I was acutely aware that I might never fully get the answer to that question. I did know a “how” though, and that evening my family used the need to eat our evening dinner as an opportunity to “pray with our feet” and support the people working in the blockaded restaurant that night, even if they didn’t know we were doing it on their behalf.

We drove downtown, past three other Landwers, and ordered an amount of food that even my mother would think acceptable (and her idea of the right amount of food is generally enough chicken schnitzel to feed the entire cast and crew of *Fiddler on the Roof* from sunrise to sunset regardless of how many people are at the table). My children understood that the longer drive to this particular location, the anticipated amount of leftovers, and the meal itself had absolutely nothing to do with dinner. It was about approaching that day, like every day, with intention and thoughtfulness, thinking about the experience of another person and using every opportunity to provide light to the world, especially in times of darkness. It was about getting our hands dirty to repair the broken pieces and leading with love, strength, and righteousness in order to rebuild because it is who we are as a Jewish people.

That Monday evening as we ate our takeout, sunk in our chairs from the weight of the world, there was a deep acceptance that even when the “why” can’t be explained, like on October 7th, the answer to “how” is, and will always be, to “pray with your feet” with every step you take.

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**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.



# Derekh Eretz

WE USED TO CALL IT SPORTSMANSHIP

BY DVORA GOODMAN

I entered a new phase of life this past September that I was not expecting and, from the minute it began, its all-consuming nature has been both momentous and overwhelming: I became a soccer mom.

My youngest discovered a passion for everything soccer and joined a team that practises at least four times a week plus goes to games. His soccer schedules dictate my life completely. Many times these past few months I have asked myself, “Why am I doing this?” The same resounding answer booms back to me: “Because it’s so good for him!”

Many positives arise with playing sports. As well as simply getting good at one particular game, there’s the learning to be a part of a team, living with commitment, carrying through with responsibility, seeing the real effort pay off, and discovering sportsmanship are just a few. My son’s city team is great and his coaches are responsible and encouraging. But when additionally he joined the soccer team at Toronto Heschel this past fall and encountered the school’s “Derekh Eretz Code of Conduct for Competitive Sports Teams,” the benefit of sports became clear to me in a whole new way. I saw his love of the game and his desire to shine actually grab the notion of ethical conduct and embed it in his highly energetic self.

The term *Derekh Eretz* literally means “the way of the land.” It can also be said to mean “the path to the land.” The Torah, the Jewish Bible, in its broadest sense, is a book that teaches us “the way” to live as ethical, responsible, justice-seeking humans. One particular Talmudic *midrash* (a story told to explain verses in the Torah) reminds me of this charge. Midrash Vayikra Rabbah 25:3, tells us that Rabbi Yehudah Ben Shimon once pointed to the verse in Deuteronomy 12:5: “After Adonai your God shall you walk,” and then wondered how a human being could possibly walk “after” God who has neither flesh nor blood. He decided it means to look to actions—not to physicality—to understand what it means to walk after God. So we learn that we walk after God by modelling God’s actions.

What the *midrash* highlights is that it is not enough to “teach” our children; rather, we must walk in front and show them, so that they will walk after us. Sometimes in a museum we see a painting by one artist that is said to be “after” another artist, as in “after Picasso”; it’s not by Picasso but is painted in the way he might have painted the subject. As parents we must make the effort to live our own lives as role models for our children so that they can copy how we live; at least our style if nothing else. We hope they will learn the way of the land, the *Derekh Eretz*, and grow into the ethical and responsible humans that the Torah inspires us to be.

Nevertheless, to me, it doesn’t always feel like it’s enough to be a role model. Sometimes, it helps to be more direct and to actually spell out a particular vision for how they should act in certain circumstances. This brings me back to soccer and the Heschel School’s “Derekh Eretz Code of Conduct for Competitive Sports,” a document that describes the kind of athletes the school wishes to cultivate. The first line of the code says: “Student athletes strive to represent Heschel, their team, and themselves well by following the Heschel Derekh Eretz Code of Conduct.” When my son, then a new member of the sports team, read the document, his eyes lit up at the description of him as a “student athlete.” The code of conduct has become pivotal to my son’s sense of who he is—an athlete, not just a boy playing a game.

At Heschel, the vision extends beyond soccer and into the classroom; athletes are expected to apply “athlete level” respect in class towards their peers and teachers, and to participate and contribute to the best of their ability, just as they would on the field. My son, so determined to be seen as an athlete, now understands that to be a fully responsible and committed member of the soccer team, he must be accountable and dedicated to his teacher, classmates, and school work. One instance is that athletes must use respectful language with their peers, coaches, and all participants in all aspects of their life, and always aim to succeed.

Wondering how the “Code of Conduct” fit into the wider school experience, I spoke with Emily Young, the Heschel School’s coordinator of *Derekh Eretz*. (Amazing! How many schools have this kind of position, I asked myself.) Emily talked about the school’s overall approach to its students absorbing and practising Jewish ethics and virtues. She cited a school-wide program called Middah of the Week as one way the school lifts Torah lessons directly from stories in the weekly Torah portion and shows students how to put them into practice at school. For instance, a middah from the Torah portion Mishpatim (from the Book of Exodus) is to create fair rules; it comes in a part of the Torah that lists rules that the people of Israel were given while in the desert. Children spend time with their teachers thinking about how to apply this middah to daily life; teachers can explain how they make sure rules in the classroom are fair to all students; and children can design fair rules for their play at recess.

The School’s “Code of Conduct” begins with “*Derekh eretz kadmah l’Torah*.” It translates as that stated premise, “*Derekh eretz* is a prerequisite for learning” (Midrash Vayikra Rabbah 9:3). Emily told me the concept applies widely. She cited an example that she sees every year at recess, also on the soccer field. Children become interested in soccer in Grade 4 and begin organizing their own games at recess. As players learn to navigate their recess soccer games and rules, frictions and emotions inevitably arise. Teachers wade in to help them take a step back and reflect on the different points of view involved in the various conflicts. The children are guided to think beyond their own perspective of what is happening on the field. *Derekh eretz*, and the notion of treating others fairly and respectfully, can help. A new frame of mind can emerge, for example, when the student complaining that the rules aren’t fair is made the referee of the game and that student then has to ensure the game is fair for everyone. This switch in roles puts the idea of fairness into practice for that student and increases enjoyment for all. Emily describes how applying a *Derekh Eretz* framework to athletics grows to feel natural to the students; it’s an extension of how they are being taught to behave in all aspects of their school experience.

Personally, I love this “Code of Conduct.” Remember, I am mother to a deeply committed soccer enthusiast. A clearly articulated sports field vision that is closely aligned to what it means to be an ethical and responsible athlete is a winning play. In combination, principle and purpose is a game play that sees our young athletes become the young people we aspire them to be—on the soccer field and off it.

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



The code made my son an athlete, not just a boy playing a game.

SPECIAL FEATURE

WE ARE  
WHAT WE DO



Responding to chaos with action is ingrained in the fabric of Jewish tradition.

# The Prophetic Call to Action

JUNIOR HIGH IN OTTAWA

BY ALAN RUSONIK

On Saturday, October 7th, 2023, synagogues across Israel were set to celebrate Simchat Torah, marking the beginning of the Torah cycle with *Parshat Bereishit*. The irony of reading *Parshat Bereishit*, the story of creation, on that fateful day, which is essentially G-d creating order out of chaos, was not lost on me. Our orderly world abruptly descended into chaos as we bore witness to a pogrom, a first-time experience for many of us. It was a moment that shook us to our core, leaving us saddened, enraged, and bewildered all at once.

Amidst this chaos, the question arises: How do we create meaning and order out of chaos? One answer lies

in action. At The Toronto Heschel School, action took various forms. Our Chevra Committee organized *tefillot* to unite and support one another as a community. We rallied to aid our brave soldiers, collecting supplies and offering whatever assistance we could. Even our students, with their innate compassion, sought ways to contribute, organizing “Shuks in Support of Israel” to raise funds for the UJA Federation Israel Emergency Campaign. We were determined to act.

Then came the planned “Canada’s Rally for the Jewish People” in Ottawa on Monday, December 4th. Despite facing setbacks—17 buses failed to show up, including two

exclusively reserved for our Heschel community—our resolve remained unshaken. Ninety-one out of 94 members of our school community who had reserved spots on these two buses found their way to Ottawa (another 75 students, parents, and teachers had made their own arrangements to meet us on Parliament Hill). Some scrambled to secure extra seats on the CHAT buses down the street, while others hastily formed carpool arrangements. The determination and unity of our community were unmistakable; we were steadfast in our commitment to act.

Responding to chaos with action is ingrained in the fabric of Jewish tradition, a testament to the resilience and determination of the Jewish people across generations. Witnessing our community’s resolute call to action resonated deeply within me, evoking memories of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and his profound contributions to the Civil Rights movement.

On Sunday, March 21, 1965, nearly 8,000 individuals gathered at Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church in Selma, Alabama, marking the commencement of the third Civil Rights march that month, following two unsuccessful attempts. This time, the participants were protected by the Alabama National Guard, federalized by President Johnson the day before. Among the diverse crowd were predominantly Black individuals, alongside white, Asian, and Latino allies. Spiritual leaders from various races, religions, and backgrounds marched side by side with Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., including priests, reverends, ministers, nuns, archbishops, and rabbis. Among them was Rabbi Heschel. Many of these courageous individuals were immortalized in a widely recognized photograph. Upon his return from Selma, Rabbi Heschel was asked whether he found time to pray during the march. His poignant response has since become legendary: “When I marched in Selma, I felt my legs were praying.”

Reflecting on our community’s response to recent events, I am reminded not only of Rabbi Heschel’s actions around “praying with his legs” but also of his profound question: “What am I here for?” that he asked in his 1965 book titled *Who Is Man?* “It is not enough,” he wrote, “for me to ask the question; I want to know how to answer the one question that seems to encompass everything I face: What am I here for?” Our community’s resolute response speaks volumes. Whether it’s third-graders selling bracelets or parents defying bigotry and antisemitism to reach Ottawa, we understand our purpose—to serve, to act, and to stand against injustice. In the face of adversity, we declare: “*Hineni*—here I am.”

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.







# Humanity and Nature

A CONVERSATION BY DESIGN

BY STACIE GOLDIN

Nature communicates with us all the time, sometimes in subtle ways, and sometimes in ways less so. It calls us to harmonize. It wants to be noticed. If nature could speak, what stories would the forest floor tell? What does the canopy witness year after year? What has fungus known across the generations? What is nature telling us today?

Walking in nature, it might be birdsong that makes you turn your head, or the gentle sway of branches in the breeze. It could be the warm scent of decaying matter, or the humorous chatter of a squirrel. For some, it is the patter of spring rain, or the silent fall of snow glistening like diamonds. Whatever calls for your notice, or draws you in, hear it as nature communicating with you.

Upon examination of the Hebrew root קָשַׁר (“keshar”), one might be intrigued to find that its root takes shape in two very closely linked words: “connection” קֶשֶׁר and to “communicate” לְהִתְקַשֵּׁר. To communicate, we must connect.

The first step in creating a connection one to another is to attend with full awareness, to listen not just with our ears but with all of our senses—watching facial expressions change, noticing body language, sensing how what is said makes us feel. Next is to reflect on conveying a response that will land as intended. We must be open to understanding our particular partner in this communication and speak so they hear us. Then we respond: perhaps with words, a facial expression, a gesture, or even a touch. The dance continues. We are connecting and we are communicating; the two are inseparable. If connected, communication works. If disconnected, no matter what is said, the message, at best, will be distorted; at worst, it will be missed entirely.

Just as we connect with one another, we have the capacity to connect with our natural environment. From the beginning, humanity and nature have been intertwined. In Bereishit 1:29, God creates fruit trees, explaining they will bear fruits that can be food. A chapter later, in

Bereishit 2:5, the reciprocal relationship of humans and nature becomes evident; trees will bear fruit for food but humans must till the soil so that the trees grow strong enough to produce the fruit.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים הִנֵּה נָתַתִּי לָכֶם אֶת-כָּל-עֵשֶׂב וְזָרַע זָרַע אֲשֶׁר עַל-פְּנֵי כָל-הָאָרֶץ וְאֶת-כָּל-הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר-בּוֹ פְרִי-עֵץ זָרַע זָרַע לָכֶם יְהִי לַכֹּלֵל

“God said, ‘See, I give you every seed-bearing plant that is upon all the earth, and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit; they shall be yours for food.’” (Bereishit 1:29)

וְכָל שִׁיחַ הַשָּׂדֶה טָרָם יְהִי בְאֶרֶץ וְכָל-עֵשֶׂב הַשָּׂדֶה טָרָם יִצְמַח כִּי לֹא הִמְטִיר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים עַל-הָאָרֶץ וְאָדָם אֵין לְעֹבֵד אֶת-הָאֲדָמָה

“When no shrub of the field was yet on earth and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted, because God had not sent rain upon the earth and there were no human beings to till the soil.” (Bereishit 2:5)

Human connection to the land becomes even more apparent, when in two *pesukim* (“verses”) later, we read that God *used soil* to create humankind.

וַיִּצְרֵן יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם עֹפָר מִן-הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נְשִׁמַת חַיִּים וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה

“God formed the Human from the soil’s humus, blowing into his nostrils the breath of life: the Human became a living being.” (Bereishit 2:7)

If humans communicate with one another through connection, to communicate *with nature*, can they do the same? The question is how to connect? Nature can teach us. It understands connection very well.

Underneath the forest floor, intertwined with the roots of the trees, a fascinating microscopic network of fungus is quietly at play. When most of us think of fungus, we imagine mushrooms sprouting out of the ground. Those mushrooms are in fact the “fruit” of the fungus, while the majority of the fungal organism lives in the soil interwoven with tree roots as a vast matrix, a latticework of mycelium, incredibly tiny “threads” that wrap around or bore into tree roots. It’s called a “mycorrhizal network,” and it connects individual plants to one another to transfer water, nitrogen, carbon, minerals, and nutrients. For example, a sapling sprouting in a shady area, with limited sunlight, reaches its leaves up for photosynthesis. To survive, it relies on nutrients and sugar from older, taller trees sent through the mycorrhizal network. German forester Peter Wohlleben dubbed this network the “wood-wide web”; through the mycelium, trees “communicate.” It is all about connection and reciprocity.

## The interconnection of humans and nature is a web of its own.

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov (1772–1810) went out into the woodlands and connected himself to nature in order to feel God’s creation and to pray. He is quoted as saying, “When one goes out to the meadows to pray, every blade of grass, every plant and flower enter his prayers and help him, putting strength and force into his words.”<sup>1</sup> It is fascinating to think that the touchpoint of being with nature to find your best self, modelled by this inspirational leader, is now receiving attention and validation for reasons that include mental wellness, environmental sensitivity and support, and peace. The Nachman model is remarkably similar to the phenomenon of “Forest Bathing,” founded by Dr. Qing Li in Japan in the 1980s.<sup>2</sup>

*Hitbodedut* התבודדות (“self-isolation”), the style of prayer popularized by Rebbe Nachman, is the act of open, spontaneous, and direct communication with God, and it is accessible to all. *Hitbodedut* encourages people to speak their minds and hearts, embrace vulnerability, and open themselves to what the universe offers, communicating with their Creator in a way which is their own. Although Rebbe Nachman recommended we pray at night while the desires of the world are at rest, the best time may ultimately be a personal choice. In *Gonzo Judaism*, Rabbi Niles Elliot Goldstein writes that “we can practice hitbodedut

spontaneously and independently, anytime, anywhere, and with absolutely no prerequisites.”<sup>3</sup>

The interconnection of human beings and woodland nature is a vast web of their own. Studies<sup>4</sup> show that, in many ways, humus (decaying matter on the forest floor) offers the same benefits to soil as colostrum offers to a human newborn. Nutrients composting on the forest bed create a womb for new plant life. In humans, the scent of soil stimulates release of the hormone oxytocin, the one which promotes bonding between mother and child along with a host of health benefits: it decreases stress, lowers pain with anti-inflammatory results, reduces anxiety, and enhances the parasympathetic nervous system, increasing digestive function.

Nature and humanity even breathe with each other. Humans inhale the oxygen that trees provide; trees survive on the carbon dioxide that humans exhale. The connection between humans and nature is innate even if not everyone makes time to notice and feel it. The bond is reciprocal. Communication is a function of intention. In nature and with nature, it is not by chance. It is by divine design.

Listen for nature’s call. Bring your children and grandchildren to listen, too. Let them feel who they are.

1 C.E. Harrison, “3 Steps to Hitbodedut: Talking to God on Your Own Terms,” ReformJudaism.org, retrieved March 12, 2024, <https://www.reformjudaism.org/beliefs-practices/spirituality/3-steps-hitbodedut-talking-god-your-own-terms#:~:text=Rebbe%20Nachman%20has%20even%20been.environment%20to%20speak%20openly%20with.>  
2 Karin Evans, “Why Forest Bathing Is Good for Your Health,” *Greater Good Magazine*, August 20, 2018, [https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why\\_forest\\_bathing\\_is\\_good\\_for\\_your\\_health.](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why_forest_bathing_is_good_for_your_health)  
3 Niles Elliot Goldstein, *Gonzo Judaism: A Bold Path for Renewing an Ancient Faith* (Toronto: Trumpeter, 2010).  
4 See, for example, Britt Holewinski, “Underground Networking: The Amazing Connections Beneath Your Feet,” National Forest Foundation, <https://www.nationalforests.org/blog/underground-mycorrhizal-network>; “The Wood Wide Web: How Trees Secretly Talk to and Share with Each Other,” *The Kids Should See This*, <https://thekidsshouldseethis.com/post/the-wood-wide-web-how-trees-secretly-talk-to-and-share-with-each-other>; and Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2010), [https://milkweed.org/book/braiding-sweetgrass.](https://milkweed.org/book/braiding-sweetgrass)

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# Nurturing the Roots of the Whole Child

THE TORONTO HESCHEL SHORASHIM PRESCHOOL

BY ANDREA ZECHARIA



**E**ach time I walk into Shorashim—the preschool classroom at Toronto Heschel—I can't help but feel inspired. There are 18 children, ranging from 18 months to three and a half years of age, and yet there is such a sense of calm. I feel a true community in the sweetness of collaboration between teacher and students and the lovely interactions among the children themselves. Parents and colleagues wonder how this can be. How do we create this little community from scratch and maintain it on a daily basis?

The answer seems straightforward, but it is quite sophisticated from a teaching point of view. Our preschool focuses on the roots of a child's personal growth, constructing for each child a solid foundation for learning from the ground up. The method attends closely to the children's early social and emotional development; it underpins students' success—not only in preschool but throughout their school careers and beyond.

*Shorashim* is the Hebrew word for “roots,” and the Shorashim preschool nourishes the children's young roots through three sources. Think of these sources as wellsprings feeding a garden where good things grow.

## Source #1: The infusion of educational and developmental expertise

Trust creates the space where learning can happen. The calm in the Shorashim classroom reveals that the children trust their teachers. The teachers' expertise nourishes this good faith which, in turn, encourages the children to engage and explore. The accumulated experience of our preschool faculty is awesome. They are educators who know how children grow and learn, and they know how to teach them; it's why their results stand out.

The Heschel School philosophy cherishes each and every child's personal journey, creativity, and spirit. It complements the Reggio Emilia approach of a holistic constructivist environment where teachers learn about their students from watching how they respond and fare in the program. Each new day they watch the children to discover what is meaningful to them at this particular time. It means that Shorashim teachers plan dynamically, which is a challenging task; their skill and dedication in doing this make all the difference.

## Source #2: Fostering the children and the learning community

Students' inclinations and fascinations inspire the activities that Shorashim teachers plan; the individuality

and identity of each child is paramount. The curriculum creates an inclusive environment that fosters each child's social and emotional development as well as fostering a cohesive community spirit in the whole group.

The Heschelian approach incorporates multisensory learning. For its preschool, the Reggio style again fits the bill as it revolves around the children's senses of sight, sound, touch, and even taste and smell. To this end, the Shorashim classroom boasts a large common area where children can be together, features natural elements such as light and greenery, and is filled with lots of accessible, wonder-inspiring objects and materials.

In the Shorashim classroom, the children are the main focus. For example, their artwork and creations are what decorate the space. The walls are a canvas for the children's works of art. Not only does the children's artwork decorate the space but it is also a fundamental reminder to the children of what they are learning.

Each child's name and photo appear next to the artwork, as well as an explanation of the specific project. This display of artwork and the references to the children's specific effort and achievement are fundamental to acknowledging their growth and accomplishments. Children explain to their classmates, parents, and visitors to the classroom what meaningful, intentional learning took place during the process of creating the art, and they are able to share their pride in the process and product.

This narrative process tells teachers a lot: it informs them about the child's recall, what steps took place during the learning, what was learned, and how the child responded both to the process and the outcome. The creative process is very important. Shorashim teachers do not help create the children's works of art but support their creative process in making them. Fostering a child's developing independence is core to their learning journey, and the ongoing interactions between the children, their peers, and the art, contributes to the growth of the learning community.

## Source #3: Nurturing the Jewish child

Shorashim is an integrated Jewish program. The goal is holistic: to nurture heart, soul, body, and mind—the whole child.

The children know from the first time they step into Shorashim that they are in a Jewish community where both teachers and students take care of each other and their environment. Teachers talk in terms of *Derekh Eretz* (“way to the land”) and remind children to be good and fair and kind to one another; they make reference to *Tikkun Olam* and show the little ones how to fix and care for their classroom and school. The children take turns to help with watering the plants, weeding the class planter outside,

setting the table, and cleaning up. While the goals are tasks at hand, they help the children learn to actively tend to their community through responsible collaboration.

Another example of integration was this year's Shorashim celebration of Tu B'Shvat, the Jewish New Year of the Trees, in which the children learned and celebrated trees through a science experiment with celery. This hands-on experiment has the children witness transpiration and water absorption as the celery stalks absorb tinted water and their leaves change colour. The experiment is an opportunity to learn plant nourishment, and the principles of science offer social and emotional learning by conveying the notion that doing good things helps something grow, just as people caring for each other can lead to visible results. Plants need water to grow; friends need kindness to feel their best.

**We cherish the personal journey, creativity, and spirit of each child.**

Shorashim adheres to the Early Learning for Every Child Today (ELECT) framework put into place by the Ontario government for Ontario early childhood settings and through this emphasizes social and emotional, cognitive, language, and physical (small and large motor skills) learning. In keeping with the advanced educational approach that Heschel uses for all grades, the ELECT framework is enhanced by the cycle of the Jewish year (Jewish holidays), core Jewish values such as *Derekh Eretz*, *Tikkun Olam*, and nature and the environment.

Another enhancement to the Ontario preschool framework sees Shorashim incorporating the traditional Jewish study model of *chaveruta* and *Jewish community*, which advances learning through collaborative engagement that entails learning through class partnerships or in small groups. Through close interaction and dialogue, classmates help one another as they sit, speak, and work together.

Two things make Shorashim stand out from other preschools. First, it is part of the amazing Toronto Heschel School, with its educational vision and warm Jewish ambiance, and second, the Shorashim approach offers full-out attention to the children's social and emotional foundations. Strong healthy roots—Shorashim—empower children to grow towards their full potential. We are setting children up for success!

Andrea Zecharia is the Director of Early Years at Toronto Heschel. She is responsible for the Preschool, and Junior and Senior Kindergarten.

# All of Me

BY JOE KANOFSKY

All souls descend a ladder from heaven to this world. Then the ladders are taken away.

—Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

When we pray, we try to align our body, soul, mind, and heart. That is often a heavy lift, particularly first thing in the morning. While modern strategies like mindfulness meditation are taking a run at claiming this historic space, Jews have been engaging in the practice for 2,000 years. We might approach prayer as a 45-minute effort to gain control over ourselves before we venture out to conquer the world in the course of our day. Summoning all the parts of ourselves to be present in a moment of prayer and ideally channelling our whole being towards something larger than ourselves, is one aim of prayer. Prayer sets our boundaries and aligns our priorities. It allows us to step out of day-to-day experience, centre ourselves, and zoom in on what our ensuing course of action will be.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote that “prayer is action. It requires complete mobilization of heart, mind, and soul.” Heschel is renowned for his social activism: towards Civil Rights and against America’s war in Vietnam. Yet the vast majority of his writings speak about the inner life of the Jew; *Man’s Quest for God* is the title of one of his many books. In a brief and highly inspirational essay, “On Prayer,” he sketches the ability to pray with all of our souls and all of our beings, as a foundational requirement to our becoming all we can be, and doing all we can do.<sup>1</sup>

Heschel was writing in the mid-20th century when much in the realm of faith in general, and in Judaism in particular, was calcifying in the public sphere. He called on Jews and all people of faith to find in prayer the passion, sincerity, and devotion that could motivate a moral and socially committed life.

The beginning of prayer is praise. The power of worship is song. First we sing, then we understand. First we praise, then we believe. Praise and song open eyes to the grandeur of reality that transcends the self. Song restores the soul; praise repairs spiritual deficiency.

Yet, in Heschel’s view, it would be a misconception to suppose that prayer is something in which only people of great faith and devotion are gifted to engage. Rather, it is a truly democratic and egalitarian daily practice. It is open to all from novice to veteran, with space to grow at all levels. Expressions of praise, request, and gratitude centre our appreciation and our awareness. They are arguably even rarer and more important skills in 2024 than when Heschel was writing.

We live in an age when forces of tech distraction and permanent partial attention conspire to weaken our capacity to pray. The essence of living as a human being is being challenged, being tempted. Heschel wrote, “The spiritual blackout is increasing daily. Opportunism prevails, callousness expands, the sense of the holy is melting away. We no longer know how to resist the vulgar, how to say no in the name of a higher yes.”

Writing in the 1950s, Heschel spoke clearly to the problems of digital overload, permanent partial attention, and the degraded meaning of words being experienced today.

[O]ne of the results of the rapid depersonalization of our age is a crisis of speech...language has been reduced to labels, talk has become double-talk. We are in the process of losing faith with the reality of words. Yet prayer can only happen when words reverberate with power and inner life.

The challenges are great, our spiritual potential is boundless. “We pray for wisdom, for laws of knowing how to respond to our being challenged. Living is not enough by itself... To be or not to be is *not* the question. The vital question is how to be and how not to be?”

Heschel said, “The real task of prayer is not only to request one’s needs, or even to praise; it is rather to fully be oneself, fully comfortable, fully at home.” Prayer “is rather like an established residence for the innermost self. All things have a home: the bird has a nest, the fox has a hole, the bee has a hive. A soul without prayer is a soul without a home.”

It is unrealistic to expect that prayer will be easy, or a skill quickly mastered. There are no shortcuts here.

The challenges are great,  
our spiritual potential is boundless.

“Prayer will not come about by default. It requires education, training, reflection, contemplation. It is not enough to join others; it is necessary to build a sanctuary within, brick by brick, instants of meditation, moments of devotion.”

Speaking about education, Heschel said,

Our goal must be to enable the pupil to participate and share in the spiritual experience of Jewish living; to explain to them what it means to live as a likeness of God. For what is involved in being a Jew? Duties of the heart, not only external performance; the ability to experience the suffering of others, compassion and acts of kindness; sanctification of time, not the mere observance of customs and ceremonies; the joy of discipline, not the pleasures of conceit; sacrifice not casual celebrations; contrition rather than national pride.<sup>2</sup>

Prayer is not transactional; it is transformational. Prayer in community brings down barriers and builds commonwealth; it opens shared space where none is felt to exist. “The only bridge is to pray together, to consult God before seeking counsel with one another. Prayer brings down the walls which we have erected.” Through prayer, in Heschel’s view, we open ourselves up to the sensations of a world beyond ourselves; of which we are a part but certainly not masters and perhaps only somewhat able to influence. But to achieve a greater sensitivity to our own selves in relation to others and to our Creator, prayer is a unique path that empowers us both to see beyond our reality and at the same time to find a home in it.

In Heschel’s summation: “We begin with a sense of wonder and arrive at radical amazement.”

1 A.J. Heschel, “On Prayer,” in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays by Abraham Joshua Heschel*, edited with an introduction by Dr. Susannah Heschel (New York: Schocken, 1997). All quotations referring to prayer that follow are taken from this edition.

2 A.J. Heschel, “The Spirit of Jewish Education,” *Jewish Education*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (1953), p. 19, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0021642530240202>.

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OUR SAGES TELL US

# LOOK AND LEARN



# Parsha Parents

CAN I FIND CLUES TO BEING A BETTER PARENT IN THE TORAH?

BY MICHELLE LANDY-SHAVIM

The wisdom of the ages is a valuable starting point.

When Alan Rusonik became principal at The Toronto Heschel School, he handed us the genius idea that we can actually provide a proactive parent counselling course and share the wisdom of Torah at the same time. With so much popular psychology and parent information in the bookstores and on the Web, it is sometimes too easy to forget that the wisdom of the ages is a valuable starting point.

The word Torah comes from the Hebrew root meaning to guide or to teach. It is thought to be simultaneously a book of ancient history, a book of metaphor, and a book of revelation. The Torah has been so central to the Jewish people that the practice of reading a portion of it out loud every week became a standard practice in every synagogue around the world. Often we think of Bible stories being sweet fables that give kids good messages. Rusonik's idea is to look at these stories from the point of view of what they can teach parents about raising children. It is a very timely pursuit and there are enough scenarios, nuances, and narratives that the Torah can be studied every week and every year and still new lessons can be learned. Whether it's a psychologist, a rabbi, a doctor, or a parent, each can view the same story through the lens of their own expertise and discover new insights.

The Torah is divided into 54 separate portions that are read weekly across the community, in synagogues, in schools, in private settings. There is a lot to learn. Called the *Parshat Hashavuah* ("portion of the week"), each of these 54 sections is a prime focus for Jewish learning.

This year, Heschel parents are gathering monthly to explore these weekly treasures. They are exploring how

reading the *parsha* and talking together can add value to the challenging craft of being a parent. The agenda of our meetings is always that we hear the narrative, then an interpretation; Moreh Alan Rusonik takes a few moments to relay the particular story of the week's portion, then a special guest speaker takes over.

## Parshat Vayishlach

Our first event dealt with *Parshat Vayishlach* from the Book of Genesis, which tells the story of Jacob. On his way to meet his family, Jacob stopped for the night and had an encounter with a stranger with whom he wrestled until day break. He suffered a dislocated hip but received a new name, "Israel," which means "struggles with God." So what can this mean for parents and children? Perhaps the wrestling match is a metaphor for the struggles that children may have with the idea that the force of God is present in our lives.

Rabbi Grover, from Beth Tikvah Congregation in Toronto, used the wrestling match as a starting point for how to discuss God with children. He suggested that it helps children to feel strong if they know there is something greater than themselves in their lives and that the effort to understand this may feel like a wrangle but is worthwhile. For example, if the goal is to help children broach the notion of a higher purpose, then it might be a meaningful activity that raises children's thoughts to get the feeling going; families might take a moment to give *Tzedakah*, charity, before Shabbat starts and use it to start a conversation about gratitude, which is a very high purpose. Just connecting the Shabbat with the

beauty and beloved righteousness in giving to others is a good start.

## Parshat Bo

Child psychologist Dr. Jasmine Eliav spoke during the week of *Parshat Bo*, which follows the Israelites as they lived through the last three plagues and left Egypt. A lot of unpleasantness was going on as the slaves busily moved towards freedom. Trust in the bigger picture was difficult and the costs seemed scary. Meanwhile, as they were preparing and hoping the Exodus was upon them, the Israelites were told to paint their doorposts red, sit down, and trust.

Dr. Eliav spoke about difficulties that arise when children are constantly on the go. She introduced the concept of "white space," which is a recognized and critical element in visual design. Blank areas in paintings allow a viewer's focus to land where it should, which helps comprehension of the overall design. Dr. Eliav encouraged parents to pause in their sometimes hectic flow of activities and add a blank space to the family agenda. She suggests that it allows for fresh interactions, restorative togetherness and perspective. (Her article on this topic from THINK 18 is reprinted in this issue on p. 26.) It's the role of the parent to help children keep the big picture in mind.

## Parshat Mishpatim

For *Parshat Mishpatim*, parenting coach Tania Twena talked about boundaries that parents need to create for their children. The *parsha* lays out highly specific rules for special festivals (Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot) as well as

other guidelines set down in the days of Sinai that implicate a wide swathe of life, such as refraining from idol worship, keeping kosher, business ethics, and the ethical treatment of animals. There are so many rules about so many things.

Twena spoke about the important role that family rules play in helping the family as well as the children to manage new, unfamiliar, or unpredictable situations. Thoughtfully arranged boundaries make children feel safe. She suggested that when parents respond to situations in the moment, perhaps impulsively, perhaps emotionally, such as according to their personal history or bias, decisions made often enhance stress and over complicate things. For example, if a mom has a fear of the possible misuse of YouTube vis-à-vis child safety and wants her kids off it, what she is really saying is that she wants limits that comply with her values. Instead of a total prohibition, which is in truth impossible to impose, the proactive value-driven tactic would be to say to her child, "I'm worried about YouTube because I really like truth and safety and I'm worried that you are not yet able to protect yourself. So when you want to use it, please come to me, and we will do it together." By putting her value system front and centre in the planning, she sets a boundary that her child can receive and respect.

So far, just with a parenting coach, a psychologist, and a rabbi we are already discovering many windows into Torah lessons. We may report back with more.

Michelle Landy-Shavim is a Heschel parent of three students. She is a lawyer specialist in Consumer Protection and fascinated by all things bureaucratic in the educational sector.

# Redesigning Childhood with White Space

BY JASMINE ELIAV, PHD

Previously published in THINK N° 18 Spring 2016.

In the visual arts, the term “white space” describes the unpainted areas of a painting or undesignated parts of a graphic layout. White space refers to the blank areas between the figures or shapes depicted. Experts say that balancing the defined (positive) shapes with the open (negative) spaces is critical to successful design.

Jan Tschichold, the famous typographer of the 1930s, regarded white space “as an active element not a passive background.” The value of white space in art is well documented. It enhances viewer attention, improves comprehension and legibility, and balances layout.<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, sometimes the equilibrium is off. Billboards and posters sometimes cram in as much information as possible, minimizing white space and overwhelming the viewer. Also, the propensity that many artists have to load up open spaces is so common that it has its own label in design terminology: *horror vacui*. Derived from the Greek, this term references a fear of emptiness and describes the artists’ motivation to fill empty space.

Gestalt psychology looks at the “meaningful whole” and includes a concept similar to white space. Its premise is that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Moreover, seeing the whole helps us make sense and create order from the chaos that may be present in the many parts.

This past decade saw parents pulled and pushed into designing their children’s lives to maximize optimal potential. It has placed a lot of pressure on well-intentioned moms and dads. Parents constantly defer to parenting experts, parenting books, blogs, Facebook pages, Instagram messages, as well as to their communities and neighbourhoods as they constantly search for what exactly they should be doing. Should they send their kids to overnight camp? If they wait, what is the impact on their child? Should they enrol a four year-old in hockey? If they wait, will it impede future hockey development?

These questions help us explore what the French author Anaïs Nin suggests when she reflects, “We do not see the world as it is; we see it as we are.” Perhaps parents do not see the whole picture; perhaps they see only fragments of many different perspectives and the chaos of random expectations.

Common sense used to guide much of parenting. It has been devalued and strangely replaced by the almost devotional surrender of parental decisions to what parents feel they “should” be doing. Some external expert seems to hold authority over what’s right and what’s wrong for their particular child. Parents feel they must choose correctly or face long-term and dire consequences to their child’s well-being.

Obviously, much has been written about the value of educational enrichment through afterschool activities,

but to what end? Already feeling depleted as the day wanes, parents embrace the compulsion to take children from a long learning day to extra-curricular activities. They then rush them through dinner straight into power struggles over homework, showering, and sleeping. Whether working, staying at home, or doing a bit of both, typically parents are stressed out by to-do lists and days that never seem to end.

In my private practice, I hear parents who are displeased with themselves for yelling, and who are significantly overwrought at home from simply trying to meet the day’s expectations. No one admits exasperation. At the same time, I hear parents describe their children struggling with sleeping, eating, and doing homework. As aptly pointed out by Cathy Gulli in the January *Maclean’s* article, “The Collapse of Parenting,” parents have come into the habit of negotiating with their children, offering rewards and incentives just to get through the day.<sup>2</sup> Our new family culture engenders a negative cycle of interaction; parents and children all feel unheard, unappreciated, and devalued.

We have to pause. We have to reflect on what is driving this need to fit in and meet expectations. Why do we nurture unrealistic assumptions regarding our own capacities, unbridled zeal for our children’s capabilities, and commitment to a chaotic family lifestyle? Are we losing the message?

I suggest it’s time to take a panoramic view of how we design our lives and spend our days. It’s time to be mindful and honest about whether what we are doing is benefiting our children or taxing them. It’s time to look at the whole.

**It’s time to take a panoramic view of how we design our lives and spend our days.**

Let’s add white. Let’s redesign childhood and see what white space can do for us. It may reveal whether we have balance in the layout of our lives. It will entail overcoming *horror vacui*—that fear of empty space—as we learn to appreciate white space, not as devoid of substance but as full of new interactions and restorative togetherness.

The content of white space may appear empty, especially if not viewed in context with colourful people and activities around it. In truth, white space—call it “down time”—embodies a direct communication to our children that yes, achievement is important, but not at the expense of developing the self. It is not the absence of

activities, smartphones, and technology that I am advocating; it’s the presence of mind to model ourselves as we relate to others, as we practise self-reflection.

Creating white space carves a place in the day where we are neither teaching, competing, instructing, nor pres-

**White space is a commitment to being available, thoughtful, and restful in our children’s presence.**

suring ourselves or our children; where we are not pursuing the latest parenting fashion or activity fad. Instead, we are just living our lives, closing our day, and enjoying the weekend. White space is a commitment to being available, thoughtful, and restful in our children’s presence.

Our children will likely fight at first and the house may get messy, but in that space we model that we are not perfect and that relationships have ups and downs. Our children can reveal who they are, not who we wish them to be or whom they believe we need them to be. In fact, white space will ultimately support their activities and explorations; it will help the whole family de-stress and be together.

“White space” is critical to a child’s development as a whole person, instead of a collection of really well-honed fragments of a person. Children need this cohesion, this Gestalt. We have to talk it up and heighten the appreciation for white space across our communities and on our websites. We can wear earplugs and ignore the noise around us that clamours for activities and schedules.

Spending open, unscheduled, and uncommitted time together, we shift the family focus to socialization, and we develop the children’s sense of self. It grounds them and it grounds us, as we jointly create and treasure our white space.

<sup>1</sup> See Barbara Marcantonio, “Design Principles—Gestalt, White Space and Perception,” *Manifesto Blog* (February 6, 2015), [manifesto.co.uk/design-principles-gestalt-white-space-perception](http://manifesto.co.uk/design-principles-gestalt-white-space-perception)

<sup>2</sup> Cathy Gulli, “The Collapse of Parenting,” *Maclean’s*, January 18, 2016, p. 43.

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**Dr. Jasmine Eliav** is a registered child clinical psychologist. She has her own private practice, is a staff psychologist at the Hospital for Sick Children, a clinical consultant to BOOST Child Abuse Prevention and Intervention, and a member of The Toronto Heschel School Board of Directors. Dr. Eliav completed her graduate degrees and postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Toronto and her research at Sick Kids in the area of child maltreatment.

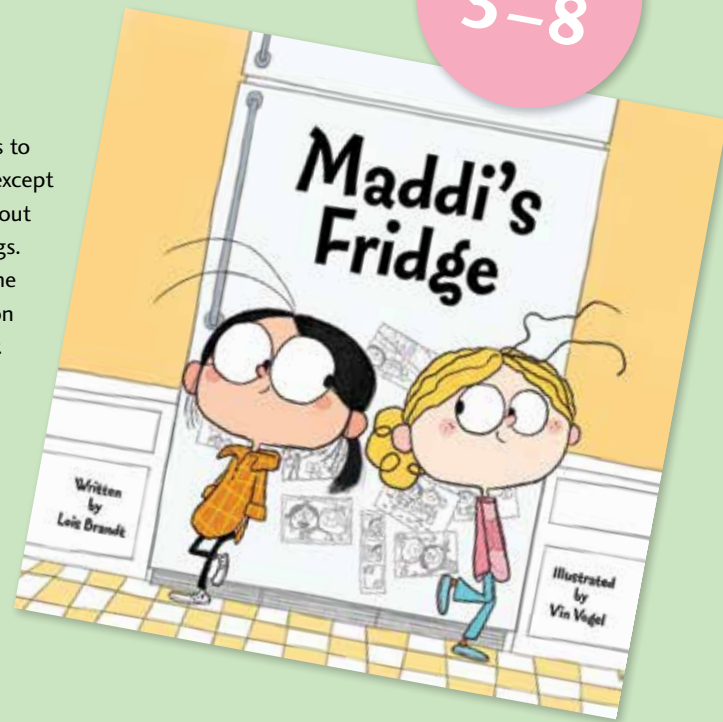
# Good Books

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHILDREN AND THE PEOPLE WHO LOVE THEM

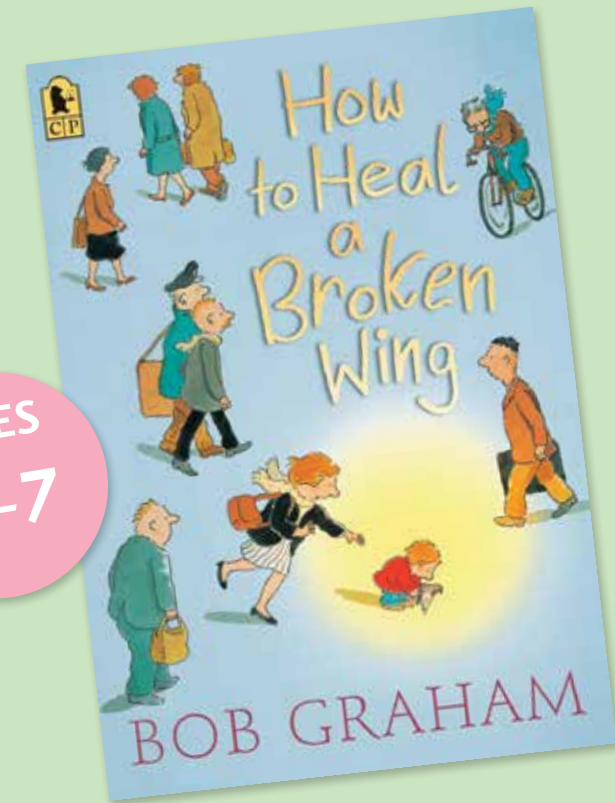
BY GAIL BAKER & TZIPORAH COHEN

**Maddi's Fridge**, written by Lois Brandt and illustrated by Vin Vogel (Flashlight Press, 2014)

"Maddie was the best climber, but Sophie was the fastest runner." Playground friends Sophie and Maddi get hungry and Sophie races to Maddi's apartment for a snack, only to find a fridge nearly empty except for a little milk. Maddi makes Sophie promise not to tell anyone about her empty fridge, a promise Sophie initially keeps despite misgivings. She sneaks food from her own overflowing fridge to Maddi, until she realizes she can't help on her own and tells her mother. The cartoon illustrations keep the story from being too heavy for a child reader. It is an essential story about friendship, food insecurity, and when to break a promise. Back matter includes ways to help those with empty refrigerators.



AGES  
5-8



AGES  
3-7

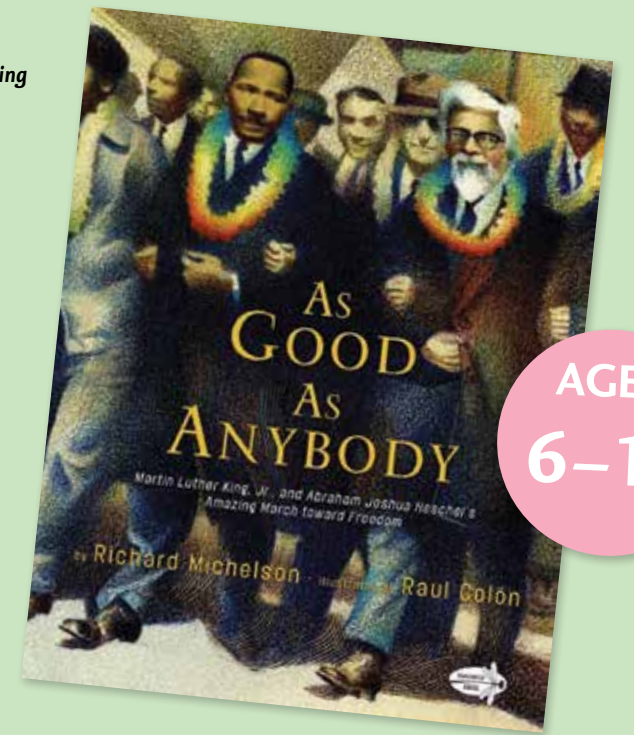
**How to Heal a Broken Wing**, written and illustrated by Bob Graham (Candlewick Press, 2017)

"High above the city, no one heard the soft thud of feather against glass." We hold our breath as we wait to see what happens when a bird crashes into a tall city building and falls to the ground. In the hurried urban environment, only a small child notices the wounded bird, which he carefully carries home with his mother's help. This tale of loving kindness has minimal text and multiple wordless spreads. The simple illustrations allow readers to slowly contemplate what is happening. Finally, "with rest...and time...and a little hope," not to mention a child's compassion, the bird heals and takes to the sky again.

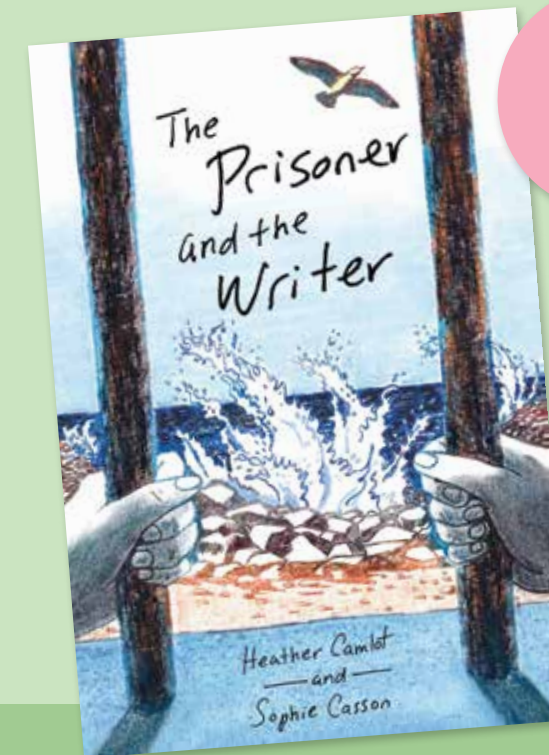
Gail Baker co-founded The Toronto Heschel School in 1996, serving as Head of School from 2001–2014. Gail is now a grandparent at the school. Tziporah Cohen is a psychiatrist and children's author, and a former Toronto Heschel parent. Her newest picture books are *Afikomen* (Groundwood Books) and *City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

**As Good as Anybody: Martin Luther King, Jr., and Abraham Joshua Heschel's Amazing March toward Freedom**, by Richard Michelson and illustrated by Raul Colón (Dragonfly Books, 2013)

Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. faced racism and threats growing up Black in 20th-century America. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel faced racism and antisemitism growing up Jewish in 20th-century Europe. This book tells how, despite their different upbringings, the two men forged a friendship and turned their experiences and sorrows into lives of hope and the pursuit of equality. Rabbi Heschel manifested his belief that "words must be followed by deeds" and Rev. King demonstrated that "the time has come for action." Together, they marched for civil rights. Palettes of brown and yellow for the southern United States are blended with blue and green for Eastern Europe during the famous march for freedom, with which this story culminates.



AGES  
6-10

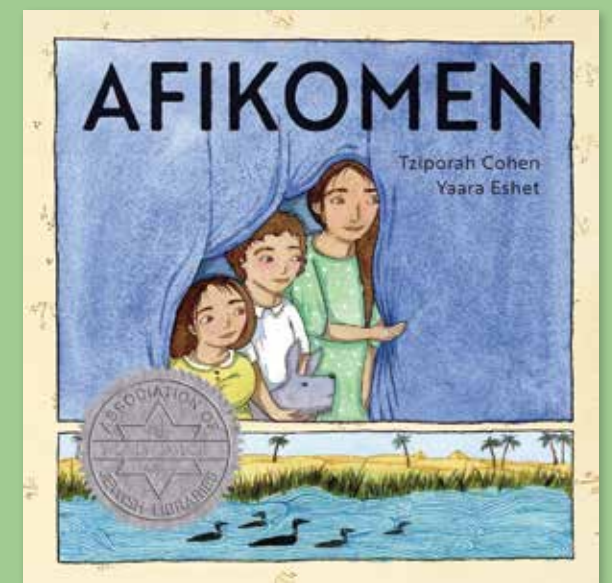


AGES  
9 & UP

**The Prisoner and the Writer**, by Heather Camlot and illustrated by Sophie Casson (Groundwood Books, 2022)

In this compelling, illustrated telling, we learn the famous story of the Dreyfus Affair, told alternatively from the perspectives of Alfred Dreyfus, the Frenchman falsely accused of military treason in 1894 and imprisoned on Devil's Island, and Émile Zola, the celebrated French writer who risked his reputation and life to expose the conspiracy, ultimately leading to Dreyfus's exoneration. Camlot's spare text and Casson's oil pastel prints place the story's emotional core at centre stage. With antisemitism on the rise, this award-winning book not only reminds of the dangers of conspiracy theories, but also underscores the importance of allies in combatting all hate. Extensive back matter includes historical detail on the Dreyfus Affair, as well as tips on how to assess whether information is objective, biased, or fake.

Mazal Tov to  
**Tziporah Cohen**  
whose newest picture book  
*Afikomen*  
won a Sydney Taylor Award Honour  
for 2024!





# 17 Years a Heschel Mom

AN INTERVIEW WITH  
LAYA WEISSBERGER

BY MAYA ZOR

Intentional happenings foster the very special Heschelian community.

**C**hevra is the Hebrew word for a close-knit group, usually a group of friends or colleagues. Developing The Toronto Heschel School population into such a group is the mandate of its Chevra Committee—to make and keep our school community a friendly, devoted, energetic collection of families. Chevra Committee events aren't just occasions with themes or activities, they are intentional happenings with the extra purpose of bringing us together to foster the very special Heschelian community that helps raise our children.

I sat down with Laya, my Chevra Committee Co-Chair, who is in her 17th and final year as a Heschel School parent. I wanted to discuss with her why the idea of *chevra* is meaningful and how she has found that it makes the Heschel experience unique.

**I know you have always been a class parent, but I wonder how you see that role meshing with the Chevra Committee?**

To me, class parents *are* the front line of the school's Chevra Committee. They are representatives in each class that serve as liaisons between parents and the teachers, the school's board, the school's administration, and so on. They take charge of lifecycle events and excursions, for example. It was important to me and for the Committee that you and I are leading this year to bring class parents into our plans and discussions and to focus on supporting them in building class communities within each grade. I served as a class parent for 16 years and always felt like I was also building and strengthening the wider school community.

**How has the Chevra Committee contributed to your Heschel experience over the years?**

There has always been a Chevra Committee at Heschel. It created the cohesive community that I knew would be there for me when our family first arrived at the school—and yes, the village was there. When my mother passed away, all three of my kids were at Heschel. Thanks to the support of the Chevra Committee and class parents who offered meals and other acts of friendship, as well as to each of my children's classes that contributed in their own way, we had incredible support during our journey through those sad days. We received meals, but more than that, parents, whom I didn't know at that time, stopped by our house to help out. The warmth that came from knowing that there were people in my children's school community who cared for them and were there for me helped immeasurably.

**How has the community changed over the 17 years you've been at Heschel and how has that impacted the Chevra Committee and its purpose?**

Despite the social changes arising from what our children now have access to on the Internet, and what their interests are, and also despite how much the world has changed, when I looked around our Welcome Back Breakfast in September and our Havdalah on Ice skating event in January, I noticed that what hasn't changed is the community. There are new community members, but it is still the same loving community that enjoys each other's company outside of school hours—parents, grandparents, teachers, faculty, and students alike—and is ready to support each other as needed.

**What do you feel has made this year different from previous years?**

When I started working together with you last July, we were excited because it felt as if the year was going to be "normal" again. We were not thinking about masks, distancing, testing, and other health safety restrictions—we were excited about the school community coming together again at events. Before COVID-19, the community and its events were all about being physically together. However, for almost three years we had lost a lot of that happy cozy feeling (despite our best efforts to stay connected and close).

Not only were we excited, but with restrictions essentially gone, I think everyone was more eager than they had been in a long time to get back to how things were and to get together again.

Together, with a parent and a board member, we planned a new event—a beautiful evening dinner in the school's Sukkah. We wanted the Grade 7 and 8 students to be more engaged with the Chevra Committee and to learn about volunteering, so for this event, we worked with Grade 7 and 8 volunteers who set up the tables, served the dinner, and actually became involved as real contributors while they were still at the school.

Little did we know that only a few days later, on October 7, our world would change dramatically. We went from not being together, to being together, to being a community in need of mutual support in a way we had never anticipated. We switched from planning class get-togethers to planning Maariv services. We looked for ways to bring families to grieve, pray, and find strength together. We went from sending welcome cards and Shabbat packages to new families in the summer and first week of school to creating welcome cards and Shabbat packages for

new families who had arrived from Israel and were joining our community for an unknown amount of time. We looked for ways to support our teachers beyond the usual Teacher Appreciation Week—our incredible teachers who managed to keep it together for our children, while they themselves were struggling.

Our summer plan did not anticipate what we experienced and continue to experience as a community. Nevertheless, the October events brought us closer than ever before and with a purpose that aligned with all that we do.

**What is the purpose of the Chevra Committee's events?**

The purpose of the Chevra Committee is to ensure that our school events strengthen our community, and that our community strengthens our school. From my many years as a Heschel parent, I treasure the Chevra Committee's role which is to foster a cohesive environment and warm supportive community.

**As you leave Heschel in June, what can you say about how the Chevra Committee and being a class parent and event volunteer affected you and your family?**

The volunteer roles I have taken on over the years, which I did for myself and for my children, demonstrated to my kids the importance of volunteering, how rewarding it can be and how it embeds us in this community we love so much. Aside from the short-term benefit of providing our family with a warm, loving, and fun place to be as our kids went through day school, I would say that showing my children "up close and personal" how volunteerism works and why it matters is how my Chevra Committee roles will have most affected my family in the long term.

Laya Weissberger and Maya Zor are parents at The Toronto Heschel School and co-chairs of the Chevra Committee in 2023–2024.





# LOOKING AT THE GOOD THROUGH EYES OF AWE AND WONDER



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