



Azrieli

Azrieli Graduate School
of Jewish Education
and Administration

SPECIAL EDITION
THE AZRIELI PAPERS

Covid-19 & Chinuch

LESSONS LEARNED
OPPORTUNITIES UNCOVERED

VOLUME II
Leadership



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Introduction

When we published the first volume of this series, Covid-19 was raging across the world, with no end in sight. In the months that have followed, vaccines have been introduced. We have moved from scrambling to get the limited vaccine appointments to having multiple vaccine options readily available. We have opened schools, shuls and even our homes, reemerging to see family and friends whom we missed in the past months.

Through these months of continued challenge and change, Jewish schools, and those that lead them, have proven they can be nimble. They have provided high quality service even when there was no guarantee of what the next days, weeks or months might bring. Most importantly, they continued to adapt and adjust, ever learning and thinking about next steps.

This second volume in our Azrieli Papers series on Covid-19 Chinuch- Lessons Learned, Opportunities Uncovered presents the views and visions of Jewish educational leaders. The essays, research, readings and resources included do not focus on these uniquely challenging times, but rather use Covid's challenges to think broadly about all Jewish schools and what the field of Jewish education can and should be. As was the case in the prior volume, each essay begins with a discussion by leaders "on the

ground"—sharing their experiences and thoughts. These essays are paired with a companion article by an Azrieli faculty member, offering their perspective as well as providing research, readings and resources to expand on the topic

We open with Jordan Soffer's urgent call for wonder in Jewish education, and Deena Rabinovich's concrete suggestions for inculcating wonder in key Jewish educational practices. The interview of Steven Eisenberg by Elana Riback Rand and Julie Golding offers a window into the challenges of leadership and a journey of learning. Karen Shawn's response underscores the impact leaders have on the educators in their settings. Gil Perl's discussion offers an intriguing perspective on specialization in Jewish schools and what such a shift might offer. My responding essay explores how the lessons of distance learning might support collaboration and sharing of resources that could expand Jewish educational offerings in much the same way specialization would. Teacher and leadership recruitment could not be put on hold during the pandemic. Eitan Lipstein's description of his experience and personal decision-making process, coupled with Scott Goldberg's consideration of best-practices in recruitment provide important guidance for both teacher and leadership hiring and development well beyond the pandemic. This volume on leadership closes with Carly Namdar's exploration of leading social-emotional learning and positive psychology applications in a Jewish Day School during the pandemic. David

Pelcovitz's companion essay furthers the discussion with a focus on positive psychology for school leaders.

As we close the 2020–2021 academic year, we can reflect on the challenges met and successes achieved. The Covid-19 pandemic quickly taught us that we were running a marathon that would require our strength and endurance. From our Azrieli students and alumni across the world, and our colleagues throughout the field of Jewish education we have heard so many stories of resilience and seen evidence of the dedication of teachers and leaders to their students and the sacred mission of Jewish education. This volume focuses on leadership, and our Jewish educational leaders most

certainly contributed much to our ability to make it this far, and to envision what comes next. We are grateful for the efforts of those represented in this volume, and all the Jewish educational leaders whose tireless efforts kept Jewish schools moving forward in such uncertain times. In our third and upcoming volume we will consider the perspectives of funders, families and communities as we consider COVID-19 Chinuch, its lessons learned and opportunities uncovered.

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WHERE
TEACHING
IS SACRED

WHERE
LEARNING
TRANSFORMS

Creating Wonderful Jewish Schools

RABBI JORDAN SOFFER

The period of extended school-building closures and the unique process of attempting to reopen amidst a global pandemic popularized debates vis-a-vis the purpose of schooling that had previously been limited to pedagogues and academics. The sudden prominence of this conversation presents a significant opportunity to promulgate a particular mission and vision of schools. Throughout this unprecedented process one theme has consistently emerged as an indispensable obligation of the modern school and particularly compelling for Jewish day schools as educational institutions committed to creating lifelong Jewish learners.

Schools ought to be, primarily and essentially, incubators for a sense of wonder. The elements of our education that we chose to retain, both when we closed our doors in March and when we reopened with major modifications in September, should signal to us the elements that we most cherish. To paraphrase the old adage: adversity does not refine a school's mission; it reveals it. It is no wonder that most schools have eschewed memorization and rote skill building in favor of creativity and community building. Certainly, basic skills and facts are important and irreplaceable, but they are not essential. Wonder, not memorization, is the greatest desideratum of education.

Why: Unpacking Wonder

Wonder is our capacity to appreciate without fully understanding. It is what causes our jaws to drop slightly, and our eyes to stare in disbelief. It is provocative and entrancing. Even, perhaps especially, a destructive virus such as Covid-19 evokes our sense of wonder; the development of a vaccine should too. In an era of unprecedented medical innovation, this virus imprisoned an entire world. It inspires awe: the ineffable amalgamation of fear and amazement. That visceral reaction is what we will call wonder.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a 20th century philosopher, wrote poetically about our unquenchable thirst for wonder. "Mankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder." Wonder, he taught, is a basic, perhaps existential human need.

Wonder is our inclination to appreciate beauty rather than dissect it. It is enjoying a song, rather than diagramming its rhythm. In Heschel's words, wonder is, "the perpetual surprise at the fact that there are facts at all." It is the impetus to question specifically from a place of awe and amazement. Unfortunately, too often schools may seek to suffocate this wonder, telling questioning students to settle down and listen, rather than encouraging genuine curiosity. Wonder is what leads us to ask why, rather than how. In Jewish life and practice, there is no question that how is relevant, but without some under-

standing of why, such practice loses its spiritual power and becomes empty ritual.

What If: A Wonder-ful New School

Schools across the world, and Jewish day schools in particular, were forced to reimagine their purpose and product. The circumstances invited and begged the question: what is our most sacred mission? I believe that our answer has been proper and deserves to be embraced even when masks are, once again, relegated to operating rooms: whatever we lose, never lose our sense of wonder. Instilling wonder is our primary mission.

Janus Korczak was a Polish educational leader who famously perished at the hands of the Third Reich after refusing to leave the children at the orphanage he ran. His educational vision was remarkably ahead of his time (and, in fact, would likely be considered ahead of his time if it were published today). In articulating the purpose of schooling, he taught, “I have the mind of a researcher, not an inventor. To study in order to know? No. To study in order to know more? No. I think it is to study in order to ask more and more questions.” Education is what occurs when newly learned information generates newer and deeper questions. As educators we are successful if our lessons evoke more questions rather than more answers. This model of education is beneficial in terms of instilling a sense of *yirat shamayim* (awe of Heaven) and in nurturing the necessary ingenuity for successful careers and lives in today’s

world. Just how we facilitate that, and how our experience of extended building closures and other challenges is what the past year has forced us to examine.

Schools across the country, including the one I head in Sharon, Ma, developed robust schedules and online curricula. Starting in pre-Kindergarten classes, students toggled between synchronous (e.g. Zoom) and asynchronous (assignment) activities. Recommendations about limiting screen time were widely ignored. Even as we reentered our building, we were siloed and separated-literally and figuratively. Replicating school as we once knew it was impossible. From early in this process it became patently clear that a direct 1 to 1 shift of the content we intended to teach before COVID would be implausible and undesirable. I, and so many school leaders, worked closely with teachers to adapt their content.

What was obvious immediately and only grew more evident with time was that the foremost goal was to give students a sense of normalcy. We wanted to facilitate their social connections and provide for their social-spiritual-emotional needs. We emphasized that given the choice between attendance that caused emotional distress or tardiness that brought relief, parents would be wise to opt in favor of social emotional needs at this juncture. Recognizing we needed to offer more than emotional support, and more than our typical content, we understood that we had to infuse our days with wonder.

How: Using Wonder

Aristotle is famously (though so far as I can tell, without actual attribution) quoted as saying, “The more you know, the more you realize you don’t know.” A peer once used a poignant image to describe this to me. Imagine a circle; whatever is contained within the circle is what you know, and everything beyond that circle is what you don’t know. As the amount that you know increases, so does that size of the circle. As the circle increases in size, the circumference interfaces with even more of the unknown. The more that we learn, the more that we are humbled. It seems to me that what we can learn from the prolonged school building closures is that this realization must be integral to our educational model.

Whether it is learning the basics of plant roots or the complexities of photosynthesis, students learn some form of earth science throughout their school life. But how often are they taught to simply be amazed at the miracles occurring in a garden? How do we invite them and move them to a place of wonder? Our lessons must be intentionally designed to make space for and promote this thinking. It is our religious and educational imperative.

The same could be said of biology, astronomy, or any other science. And, the same can be said of any subject, whether it is the use of language, the waves of history, the sequences of math, the wanderings of the Jews in the stories of Tanach, the discussions of our sages in the pages of the Mishnah and Gemara. Our bifurcation of *limmudei*

kodesh and *limmudei chol* undermines our appreciation of both. All learning must be understood through a prism of wonder.

Conclusion

It has been evident since our first days of distance learning that a typical curriculum would be insufficient. We were forced to slow down, and to have even greater intentionality in our lesson planning. This is a tremendous blessing, and one that we must capitalize on even when, G-d willing, we return to normalcy (if such a thing is even possible). In slowing down, we lean into the why. We provide students the space to explore and we buttress that exploration with awe. Wonder has two simultaneous effects: it allows us to appreciate the world as it is and empowers us to explore the power we have to change it. This is not simply an educational model; it is a covenantal vision of existence. From Avraham to today our peoples’ mission has been to appreciate with awe and improve with vigor; this renewed educational emphasis allows us to pursue this mission faithfully.

Wondering About Wonder

DEENA RABINOVICH, EdD

Jordan Soffer argues eloquently for the value of wonder in our schools. Both research and my own experience as an educator support the notion that wonder is a powerful ingredient in impactful education. Is wonder a skill or an emotion? Can wonder be taught? Can we create schools that teach the skill of wondering, or that infuse their curricula with wonder? I would like to explore how wonder could be woven into our Jewish day schools in the spiritual realm [how we relate to God and teach our students to relate to God] and the pedagogical realm [how we teach our students].

Wondering About Prayer

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel explained wonder as a state of mind that encompasses the spiritual and a way of looking at the world.

Spirituality is about awe and wonder – the recognition that there is something beyond oneself. Prayer, in Jewish practice, is a means to connect to the Divine, to develop a relationship and engage in a conversation with that beyond oneself. As Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks wrote in his 2011 *Letters to the Next Generation II*:

“Prayer is to the soul what exercise is to the body. You can live without exercise but it will not be a healthy life. You can live without prayer, but whole areas

of human experience will be closed to you. Prayer changes the world because it changes us, opening our eyes to the radiance of God’s world, our ears to the still small voice of God’s word.”

While prayer should always include or invite wonder, we must ask if how we currently engage students in prayer is sufficiently “wonderful”. Some suggestions are offered below.

- Provide the context of connection –help students see prayer as a way to connect with and talk to God.
- Introduce and explain new prayers before including them as part of tefillah
- Allow students to create text-to-self connections - what does a prayer mean to them? Have them reexamine those connections each year as they grow and mature.
- Give students opportunities to articulate for whom or for what they are praying.

Wondering About Teaching and Learning

Wonder in the educational realm is associated with curiosity. Research on curiosity shows that there are several benefits to curiosity (see the Ostroff article listed in Readings, below). It jump-starts and sustains intrinsic motivation which allows for deeper learning. It releases dopamine, a neurotransmitter in the brain, which increases pleasure and motivation. It has also been shown to enhance cognitive skills.

Children don’t need to be taught to be curious. They need opportunities

that allow their curiosity to flourish. Curiosity-promoting learning does not follow a schedule, it requires openness and flexibility, a challenge for Jewish day schools attempting to impart a dual curriculum. While it may seem impossible to allow the time and space in the curriculum to foster curiosity, it is an investment that yields powerful dividends in increased motivation to learn.

Some suggestions for creating a ‘wonder’ful culture of curiosity in the classroom:

- Model curiosity. Educators’ wonder and questioning provide students with a great example.
- Teach to the value of questions.
- Value and celebrate curiosity.
- Encourage students to try something new, even when it requires taking risks and making mistakes.
- Provide time for students collaborate
- Link skill building exercises to topics and content that students find interesting.
- Allow time outside the classroom for exploration of the real world.

Wonder is an emotion and contains elements of curiosity and surprise. As an emotion, it can be nurtured in the right environment. Wonder as a pedagogical tool encourages students to uncover the mysteries contained in the world and to appreciate how much more there is to learn about them. Wonder is also related to spirituality since it places us in perspective to the vastness of the universe around us.

Taking the time to rediscover wonder will benefit student and teacher alike as they explore infinite possibilities and learn and grow together.

Research, Readings and, Resources

Research

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<https://online.ucpress.edu/abt/article/80/6/416/91882/Making-the-Science-Classroom-a-Place-for-Wonder>

Article on making the science classroom a place of wonder

www.edutopia.org/blog/why-curiosity-enhances-learning-marianne-stenger

Resources

www.youtube.com/watch?v=iG9CE55wbTY
Ted Talk by Sir Ken Robinson regarding “Do Schools Kill Curiosity?”.

<https://inservice.ascd.org/teaching-curiosity-through-responding-with-wonderment-and-awe/>
Discussion of ASCD initiative to inculcate wonder in classrooms

About the Authors

Rabbi Jordan Soffer is the Head of School at Striar Hebrew Academy, and an EdD candidate at Azrieli. Rabbi Soffer was awarded the Covenant Foundation's 2020 Pomegranate Prize, recognizing emerging leaders in the field of Jewish education. Rabbi Soffer lives in Sharon, MA with his wife, Dr. Marti Soffer, and two rambunctious daughters, Maayan and Reitut.

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“ From Avraham to today our peoples’ mission has been to appreciate with awe and improve with vigor; this renewed educational emphasis allows us to pursue this mission faithfully.”

The Nes in the Nisayon: An Interview with Rabbi Dr. Steven Eisenberg

ELANA RIBACK RAND
AND JULIE GOLDING

In the Age of Covid, so many things can go wrong that it is tempting to overlook and obscure what can go very right. The first time the three of us tried to schedule a meeting to discuss this article, a series of miscommunications meant the meeting didn't happen. A litany of separate but equally obstructive scheduling conflicts meant we missed each other the second time, too. With persistence and a bit of creativity, we were finally able to arrange a conversation under what are now commonplace circumstances: simultaneously working from home and supervising Zoom school, and, in Rabbi Eisenberg's case, recovering from a second vaccine dose. By the time we all saw each other together on Zoom, we were so pleased the meeting had worked out that the memories of the failed attempts were rendered irrelevant.

The relief and excitement when we finally connected captures the essence of Rabbi Eisenberg's newfound attitude towards day-school leadership. As the lower-school principal of Manhattan Day School (MDS), his 2020–2021 mantra, "Be grateful for what you have," reflects both his approach to daily

decision-making and his impression of his students' resilience during this unprecedented time.

"They are so grateful and happy to be present in school," he says. "We think we need the most robust programming, engaging after-school activities, and school-wide assemblies, but we overlook how important just being in school is... Students are so happy, even if it means spending the majority of the day at their desks behind a divider."

Safe & Open

Students' need to be in school guided the decision-making principles by which the MDS administration team, led by the Head of School, Ms. Raizi Chechik, has been operating since September: Keep everyone safe, and keep everyone in school for in-person learning. (And it's working. As of the writing of this article, MDS has not had to close the school during the 2020–2021 school year due to Covid.) Although school may look different from what one might ideally want to see, says Rabbi Eisenberg, allowing every student to be in school every day is the number-one priority, a priority that has been reinforced by students' excitement to be in school.

Like many Covid-era schools, MDS creatively repurposed existing spaces to facilitate social distancing. Ms. Chechik, along with Executive Director Adrienne Mittan, relocated half of the middle school to space in a nearby synagogue, and the library, smart lab, and other specialty rooms were converted to classrooms. Of course, these logistical solutions created their own challenges:

With the exception of gym, students were relatively stationary throughout the day, and teachers had significantly heavier workloads as they taught more classes to allow smaller class sizes. In addition, an uptick in faculty absences due to Covid exposure further increased work-loads.

Leading the Charge

One of the best pieces of advice that Rabbi Eisenberg received was to take care of his teachers as well as possible. No amount or type of communication was seen as excessive. As the administration undertook the responsibility to check up on the health and mental well-being of all staff members, relationships among faculty and administration deepened: “Without the typical boundaries—we saw into one another’s living rooms and kitchens . . . It made us much closer.”

Rabbi Eisenberg credits his faculty with cultivating a “positive, loving environment” despite the year’s many challenges: “Covid has shown us that we can do more than we thought we could... Teachers provided that safe place, that anchor in this craziness.” Giving support to teachers, whether by covering classes or providing extra encouragement, gave them the confidence and strength to remain grounded.

Connections Matter

Connections with parents and families were also enhanced. While the administration always viewed parents as their partners, the scope of that partnership

expanded far beyond the academic. A parent advisory committee was created to inform and help guide the administration regarding the ever-changing guidelines and recommended practices during the pandemic. This team of medical parent volunteers—including a psychologist, psychiatrist, infectious disease doctor, and social worker—met weekly with school liaisons. Their tireless work to balance the advantages of keeping the school open and “as normal as possible” and the maintenance of rigorous standards for the safety and health of the school community was critical.

In the early days of the pandemic, when most US schools were banned from operations in their buildings, MDS administrators phoned every family twice a month to touch base about students’ emotional well-being. The school also offered parenting classes and workshops to engage students’ families as well as regularly scheduled town hall meetings for parents of different grade levels to keep them apprised of new developments and rules. Rabbi Eisenberg recalls multiple discussions about morning and bedtime schedules, working with parents to navigate each individual child’s most optimal and regular routine.

“Boundaries that I had previously established needed adjustment given the constantly changing situation,” Rabbi Eisenberg noted. “Parents would call me on my cell phone at all hours.” This erosion of boundaries did come at a cost: “In all of my years working in schools, I have never worked as hard or as many

hours as I did during those early months of the pandemic.”

Addressing Social-Emotional Needs

From March to June 2020, the social-emotional well-being of the students became a greater focus. Rabbi Eisenberg describes how he and his colleagues had to “bring camp to school” with programming designed to foster and strengthen interpersonal connections. The school offered virtual night activities, “dreidel Zoom,” weekly Shabbat onegs, a challah bake, and a weekly communal *Havdalah*. This focus on the students’ social-emotional wellness required flexibility and often meant prioritizing what in the traditional learning experience was essential..

“There are no ‘shoulds,’” Rabbi Eisenberg discovered. “Often we get so caught up in what students *should* be learning or *should* be doing, and what methods or content teachers *should* be using, that we lose sight of where they actually are. Wherever they are, that’s where they need to be met. Student well-being is most important.”

“Our students and teachers exceeded all of our resilience expectations” says Rabbi Eisenberg. “Our teachers learned new skills and methodologies. They stretched their practice to reach their students when we were fully remote, then in a physically-distanced classroom, and finally, in hybrid environments. Our Ed Tech team worked overtime to meet teachers’ demand for professional learning and growth. Our teachers’ expectations of themselves were high, and they held similar

expectations for student engagement and achievement. Our attendance rates were excellent throughout, and students weren’t merely showing up, they were, and are, learning! We are very impressed by the quality of student work and the extent to which we have been able to limit the detrimental impact of the pandemic on student learning.”

Once daily life settled into a “new normal,” fostering a positive and loving environment for students remained front and center. “Covid made us more aware of how much we’re able to do and how well we can do everything,” says Rabbi Eisenberg. Simple gestures like greeting students each morning and showing them how happy everyone is to see them make a world of difference. In return, the school has seen a vast improvement in student behavior. Students were so grateful and happy to be in the classroom that concerns about predicted attachment issues among elementary students and other behavioral issues that might surface after so many months at home were entirely unfounded.

Covid Keepers

Strengthened relationships among administrators, faculty, students, and families are some of what Rabbi Eisenberg has dubbed “Covid keepers,” new logistical, interpersonal, and philosophical developments that he wants to carry over into a post-Covid world. Logistically, distanced learning opened up new possibilities for teaching and extra-curricular programming outside of the school building. Even when being physically together is not possible, the

MDS community will still be able to connect. Rabbi Eisenberg also notes that he and his fellow administrators expanded their professional network as they drew on heretofore untapped resources in day schools across the country and with New York City-based colleagues beyond the day-school world. Those connections, he hopes, are here to stay.

The greatest “Covid keeper,” however, is a reframing of everyday life. Rabbi Eisenberg is reminded daily of how important it is to appreciate all that we have. Having school open and connecting with one another in person used to be the norm: It is now a much appreciated privilege.

Even without the “bells and whistles” of a typical school year, he says, each daily interaction serves to remind us to focus not on what we can’t do, but on how fortunate we are. “Reflecting on the word *nisayon*, which means challenge and *nes*, meaning a raised flag or standard we look up at, Rabbi Eisenberg says: “Dealing with adversity can make you stronger or weaker. It made us stronger”.

The School Ecosystem: School Leaders’ Influence on Teachers

KAREN SHAWN, PHD

Even before the Spring semester at AGS ended, our graduating Master’s students had begun the search for the teaching position of their dreams.. In a recent assignment, I asked them to describe a school that would be a perfect fit, a place where they would happily spend many productive years. Interestingly, their responses varied little. They imagined a work environment where they would be allowed to put into practice all the methodologies they had learned in their studies at Azrieli. They envisioned supportive peers, colleagues to whom they could turn for mentoring, for ideas in curriculum development, for support with class management, and for any other issues they might confront. They hoped for an administrator who had been a master teacher, someone who would understand and support the faculty, who would recognize inevitable stressors in teachers’ day-to-day lives and work to mitigate them wherever possible. They wanted to work with parents who would serve as partners, not adversaries, in their children’s learning. They dreamt of policies that allowed a certain number of sick and personal days, and the security of a long-term contract. They all longed for their

very own, well equipped classrooms!

Their wishes illustrate the fact that teachers do not exist in a vacuum, behaving in a prescribed manner in a closed-door classroom, but rather that they and their practice are shaped in part by a larger ecosystem, “simultaneous interactions occurring within and among the teacher, classroom, [and] school” (Strom, Martin, & Villegas, 2018, p. 3). While they bring their own understandings, beliefs, philosophy, vision, preferences, and educational and professional backgrounds to their practice, teachers can succeed only when their surrounding ecosystem, including colleagues, classroom conditions, administrators, board members, parents, and the school culture itself, support and are aligned with these ideas.

The interview with Rabbi Eisenberg, lower school principal at Manhattan Day School, demonstrates the power of one element in an ecosystem to impact many other elements—that is the role and influence of school leaders. According to Eldar et al. (2003), and Farrell (2003), administrators provide support and advocacy, provide guidance and resources, and these efforts and actions boost educator confidence. True as that was in past years, *kal vachomer*, how much more so it was during the pandemic! It seems clear that Rabbi Eisenberg, together with his administrative colleagues, not only understands this but has also made it the school’s mission, this year in particular, to ensure an ecosystem that would benefit and support teachers as well as other ecosystem elements.

An ecosystem, by definition, includes interconnected members. Just as in a

biological ecosystem the availability of sustenance for one member (i.e. insects for small animals) can support the well being of other ecosystem members (i.e. larger predators), in schools often creating growth and support for teachers benefits students and families. Clearly, the MDS administrative team understood the needs of their ecosystem, and intervened on multiple levels, maximizing the impact on school climate. MDS supported and advocated for faculty by providing help and guidance as they learned to teach online and in a hybrid model. The provision of physical and emotional resources also contributed to a positive, growth-oriented ecosystem. This approach was expanded to include parents and students as well, with outreach and social-emotional support generously offered through multiple vehicles.

Considerable research documents the impact of positive school climate and ecosystem on students, families and teachers (Gray, Wilcox & Nordstokke, 2017). In particular, Briner and Dewberry (2007) found a connection between teacher resilience and teacher mental health and student academic outcomes in elementary and middle schools, accounting for 8% of the variance. While this may seem a moderate influence, Briner and Dewberry argue that unlike other unchangeable factors impacting student outcomes, such as parental literacy or poverty, teacher resilience can be easily promoted by school leadership. Specific leadership practices, including effective communication (Halawah, 2005), teacher support (Littrell, Billingsley, & Cross 1994) and

positive interpersonal relationships with teachers, parents and students (Day, 2008) have been documented to benefit school climate. Rabbi Eisenberg and the MDS leadership were living examples of these research supported practices. And they were not alone. In our discussions with Azrieli students, placed in student teaching and employment positions around the world, we routinely heard of school, community, and parent leaders who contributed their efforts and support to make a difficult situation work for all.

The year Rabbi Eisenberg describes was a year of *nisqyon*, challenge, and could have plunged his teachers, students, and parents into chaos. The numerous best practices MDS employed, using sound educational theory to inform their actions, produced deeper and more meaningful relationships, new educational and technological possibilities, and an enhanced sense of gratitude for the blessings that allowed the school to remain open and the faculty and students to be safe within it. An ecosystem of care and growth was supported, even in times of great challenge. Such administrators build the school climates that help to make the dream schools of our new teachers, and all teachers a reality.

Research, Reading and Resources

Research

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Resources

www.schoolclimate.org/school-climate

Website of the National School Climate Center, with readings and tools

www.youtube.com/watch?v=QwH370O26ZM

Brief introductory video on school climate and factors that support warm, growth oriented climate

www.youtube.com/watch?v=dGZSPSvfwWw

Brief video by Simon Sinek on school culture and Start with Why

About the Authors

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A Strategic Reset for Day School Finances

RABBI DR. GIL S. PERL

In the Spring of 2020 school administrators and boards were bracing for a repeat of the financial challenges of 2008. Already reeling from the sudden shift of education and school operation from a physical space to a virtual space, many of us found ourselves in the midst of a near total shutdown of our local economies with no end in sight. Looking ahead to the 20–21 school year, we projected frightening financial scenarios of somewhat lower enrollment, significantly lower fundraising, and substantially higher scholarship needs due to job loss and deflated incomes.

Yet for most Jewish day schools Doomsday never came.

When it became clear that schools would reopen in person in many locales the threat of a significant drop in enrollment began to dissipate. And while whole sectors of the American economy were devastated by the pandemic and the ensuing lockdown — and while numerous families in every Jewish day school felt the acute pain of increased financial pressure — the impact on the major Jewish communities as a whole seems to have been far less crippling than we had feared. Scholarships were up, but not remarkably so. Fundraising was down, but not overwhelmingly so. In fact, ironically and most unexpectedly,

in place of the financial crisis we were expecting, a number of schools experienced a financial windfall of sorts.

After decades of creating truly robust curricular and extracurricular programs, our schools found themselves forced by COVID to scale back their programs in a myriad of ways. Gone were the elaborate Open Houses replete with food and swag for hundreds of people. Gone were the *shabbatons*, the trips, and the athletics. There were no more tournaments or performances or interscholastic competitions. Not only were schools saving the direct program costs associated with all of the above, but they were able to cut back on the personnel costs of staffing them as well.

Of course, in many cases these unexpected savings didn't stay in any school's bank account for very long if they made it there at all. Running a school during a global pandemic brought with it an onslaught of new expenses. From medical staff to furniture; building modifications to PPE; expanded bussing services, janitorial services, and teaching staffs; sanitizing, subs, and paid leave; the additional costs of operating a school in the COVID era often equaled or exceeded the savings that emerged. So while the "windfall" of 2020 may not have done anything more than allow schools to survive, it has created opportunities for strategic thinking about the future. The necessity of running schools in 2020 without elements of our program that we would have considered to be essential in 2019, has opened the door for innovation in 2021 and beyond. And before we let the force of habit or the fear of

change lead us to constructing our post-pandemic budgets in exactly the same way we did prior to the pandemic, we may benefit from pressing pause.

A decade or so ago, much of the rage in the Modern Orthodox Jewish Day School world was the need for “no frills schools” that would offer a stripped back version of a yeshiva day school that focused only on the basic educational pieces without any of the bells and whistles that enrich and enhance most of our community’s schools. That is not the model I am advocating. I don’t see learning and emotional support, athletics and the arts, technology integration and STEM exploration as luxuries our children can do without. But I do see a moment for reflecting upon how we deploy such resources and for considering how we might do so in a more strategic manner.

Before we can be strategic, however, we need to define strategy. Roger Martin, the former Dean of University of Toronto’s Rotman School of Management and one of the world’s leading management thinkers, defines strategy as “an integrated set of choices that uniquely positions the firm in its industry so as to create sustainable advantages and superior value relative to the competition” (see Laffley & Martin, 2013, p.3 in the suggested readings below). When I survey the landscape of Modern Orthodox elementary and high schools, my sense is that what truly separates one from another is the geography and gender of the populations they serve—and very little else. The scope and sequence of subjects and courses taught are virtually identical. The range of curricular and extra-

curricular offerings have only slight variations. With a few notable exceptions, the educational philosophy and classroom pedagogy of one mirrors that of the others. And whereas geography and gender might have been enough “to create sustainable advantages” in the day school industry in the past, with the plethora of choices available to families in the large Jewish communities today, I think we can do more and I think we can do better.

The leading driver of increased expenses and, hence, increased tuition in our day schools is the need schools feel to be everything to everyone. Schools need to have a *mechina* track for students from weaker backgrounds and a *masmidim* track for the stronger learners. They need resource rooms and enrichment programs; theater, music, and art programs for budding performers and artists; and a laundry list of sports programs for aspiring athletes. There must be newspapers, magazines, and journals for young writers together with robotics, design, and engineering opportunities for the technology inclined. Their formal educators have to be on par with those of the local independent schools and their informal educators must rival those of the best camps and youth organizations. This trend of investing in the widest possible swath of programmatic elements is what Martin refers to as “optimization of the status quo.” And “optimization has a place in business” he reminds us, “but it isn’t strategy” (Laffley & Martin, 2013, p. 4).

Strategy is about making hard choices. It’s about taking some risk in order to maximize reward. Not any risk. But

risk in places that align with an organization's mission and that have the potential to differentiate it from the competition. In the "cascade of choices" Martin outlines for developing an organization's strategy, the first question an organization has to ask itself is "What is your winning aspiration?" It's about defining your mission and what your mission looks like when actualized. Most yeshiva day schools do a pretty good job at that. Martin's second question, though, is "Where will we play?" And it's here that we often fall flat. Our answer for too long has been "everywhere." Or worse yet, in many cases we haven't even asked the question. Instead, we just keep adding to our programs in accordance with the educational flavor of the month, rather than deferring to a truly strategic plan.

While Martin's objective is to help companies "win," I am not interested in seeing one yeshiva day school outmaneuver its competition. Quite the contrary, it's not our schools who need to win, but our students.

Imagine for a moment that a school makes a bold decision that instead of spending hundreds of thousands of dollars every year on athletics, it is going to invest that money in its science program. Instead of JV and Varsity coaches, trainers and tournaments, it purchases centrifuges and PCR machines, plant environmental chambers and dry convection ovens, and pays lab technicians to assist students with afterschool research. What heights might our science students achieve?

Imagine a school that makes a decision not to fund multiple school bands

and a choir and an a capella group. A school that passes on the 3D printers and the laser cutters and the CNC routers. Instead, it invests in a proper weight room and hires fitness coaches and dietitians who help our student athletes maximize their potential. What could our athletes become?

And what about the creative souls amongst our community's students? Imagine the Yeshiva High School for the Arts; the Yeshiva High School for Engineering and Design.

What is true on the secular side of our program is equally true on the Judaic side. While some of the all-boys high schools devote more time to Gemara and less time to Tanach than their co-ed counterparts, and a few all-girls high schools offer intensive Gemara while others do not, that's about as far as the differences in our Judaic curricula go. What about the boy who wants Tanach to be the centerpiece of his education with only a little Gemara on the side? What about the student who wants to study Machshava for one or two periods a day rather than one or two periods a week? Where are the schools for them?

Where is the Modern Orthodox yeshiva vocational high school for the students who are never going to be Shakespeare scholars but have the potential to thrive as plumbers and restaurateurs? Where is the selective yeshiva high school that is truly preparing the next cadre of community leaders?

This vision of yeshiva day schools with unique well defined foci that allow our students to exceed the limits necessarily imposed upon them by the every-

thing-to-everybody model would have been impossible two or three decades ago. And in communities outside of the New York area, LA, and South Florida, it is likely to remain out of reach for quite some time. But our biggest communities are thriving today in an unprecedented manner. Our schools are large and numerous. With a bit of communal will and a healthy dose of courage and gumption, it can be done.

It starts with our boards. If they continue to convulse at the thought of even a short-term dip in enrollment numbers, the status quo will prevail — and our kids will lose out as a result. In a recent piece Roger Martin wrote that his “test for whether a stated choice is actually a strategic choice is whether or not the opposite of the choice is stupid on its face” (see Martin, 2020 in suggested readings below). A decision whose opposite is “stupid” is not a bad decision, but it’s not a strategic decision either. The hard choices, the ones that have merit

on both sides, are the ones that have the potential to be difference makers. Worrying that shifting resources from art to athletics and from Gemara to Machshavah will result in a short term loss of some students is not stupid. But its opposite may provide the potential for our children to soar. And reallocating resources rather than returning them to tuition payers may not reduce the expense of a yeshiva day school education, but it may significantly increase its value.

Even with intrepid boards, this vision can’t be actualized overnight. It won’t be the result of one strategic decision but of many, made over multiple years, by multiple schools. But COVID has broken the ice. It has afforded us the opportunity to reassess what is and isn’t essential and how best to spend the communal dollars entrusted to our care. Let’s do it carefully, communally, and strategically.

“Strategy is about making hard choices. It’s about taking some risk in order to maximize reward. Not any risk. But risk in places that align with an organization’s mission.”

Rethinking Strategy: Sharing Resources Across the Field

RONA MILCH NOVICK, PHD

Rabbi Dr. Gil Perl provides a powerful argument for an intentional decision making process to radically shift from all schools attempting to meet all students' needs, to a more specialized model. Imagine creating the resources and centers of learning to support the growth of Gemara kups or parshanim, to develop engineers or musicians or athletes. Whether one endorses this approach or opts for a more broad based traditional "liberal arts" curriculum that provides a smorgasbord of content with no gourmet options, that the Corona pandemic invites us to think beyond the status quo is inarguable.

As Rabbi Dr. Perl acknowledges, more focused, specialized schools would only be economically feasible in large Jewish population centers. The idea, however, that it may be financially inadvisable or impossible for every school to support every content or skill area, within the curricula and through extra-curricular activities is valid for schools wherever they are located. I believe Covid, by forcing our exploration of distance learning, self-directed learning, and other atypical vehicles may provide opportunities for exactly the specialization Rabbi Dr. Perl recommends—allowing schools to offer a broad array of learning activities while

concurrently specializing in an area of their particular strength. This would require rethinking the boundaries that currently silo our field and creating collaborative structures that transcend geography.

Before Covid, we assumed that the particularly gifted Gemara teacher in a West Coast school only benefitted the students in his/her classes. We imagined that a great coach or physical trainer in the Northeast would build the muscle and athleticism of his/her local student athletes. We utilized the creative talents of a skilled writer or artist in one local setting, or considered sharing such talents across 2 or 3 local programs a great innovation. YU Torah has, for years provided thousands of hours of learning to participants all over the world. Peloton and other companies have clearly demonstrated that fitness and coaching can be accomplished via distance learning platforms. Similarly, there are numerous writing, art, and other programs that engage creative learners; in fact, I benefitted from dance classes with Jacob's Pillow professionals this past summer! What if Jewish day schools could grow their students' talents and address their particular interests through access to a wide array of educational opportunities, supported by highly talented educators?

There are two "wins" to this approach. First, no school needs to financially support every topic area, to hire expert educators in every field. Second, those extraordinary educational professionals, who up until now have enjoyed only limited and local recognition, greatly expand their reach and impact.

How would such an approach work? I am indebted to my colleague, Dr. Scott Goldberg at the Azrieli Graduate School, who has already consulted with schools on partnerships that span states and allow both remote learning and inter-school visitations, and who has shared other ideas for collaboration. Creating synchronous and asynchronous online learning opportunities that are coupled with either an educator visiting the participating school, or a regional hub where students from participating schools have regular week-long and Shabbat in-person learning events would facilitate the specialized options Rabbi Dr. Perl espouses. Students need not remain in their homes for such learning experiences but could gather in a single location, enjoying the social interactions/connections with peers and local teachers, and synchronous live in-person classes offered in the local school. This model is currently being developed at Nishmat Adin in Scottsdale, Arizona, which is launching for the 2021–2022 in partnership with the Shalhevet High School in Los Angeles.

In line with some of the early educational disruptive thinking of Clayton Christensen (www.christenseninstitute.org/), Dr. Goldberg has also suggested a “Hotels.com” model, where schools could make available open/excess seats in their in-person and/or online classes worldwide to allow students from other locales to take these courses. This not only has the potential to expand learning opportunities for students, but also to broaden social networks beyond local communities, increase revenue for schools that have surplus seats (with the

possibility of reducing/capping local tuition), and more. Azrieli Graduate School and Yeshiva University are currently considering the best way to support schools in these creative collaborative approaches.

As noted above, these models must grapple with balancing the social-emotional-spiritual benefits of being part of a physical community of learners inspired by committed and engaging Jewish educators. Jewish day schools are, research has shown, powerful identity builders, and I believe that is in very large part a function of the extraordinary role modeling and personal interactions skillful Jewish educators offer. This expansion/specialization approach, however, would enrich what happens in the building by connecting schools and students to resources that would otherwise be beyond their geographic, and perhaps financial reach.

Finding funding support and creating an infrastructure that would allow this rich sharing and connecting across the field are critical if such a move forward is to occur. As Rabbi Dr. Perl suggests, the Covid pandemic invites strategic thinking and a willingness to let go of old notions seems warranted. We can best support our schools and our students as people of the book, and the ball field, and the science lab, and the art studio, when we realize we are all in this together, and collaboration amongst us will bear wonderful benefits.

Research, Readings and Resources

Research

Fischetti, J., & Smith, R. (2010). Introduction to the Special Issue on Transforming the American high school: the Premise and promise of small learning communities. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 85(3), 259-263.

Neumann, R. (2008). Charter schools and innovation: The High Tech High Model. *American Secondary Education*, 36(3), 51-69.

Readings

Latham, T. (2017). The irony of specialized high schools. *The Atlantic*, December 22, 2017. Accessed at www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/why-arts-high-schools-produce-science-and-math-majors/549062/ – an interesting exploration on how specialization in high school promotes passions.

www.asuprepdigital.org/PartnershipConnect?utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=1t_2021_b2b-partnerships_us_search&utm_content=school-partnerships-online-edu&utm_term=high%20school%20online%20courses&gclid=CjwKCAjw-e2EBhAhEiwAJI5jg7PL7MhXAejUtyv74X3nMP4HT3ojs0Q_rABhEc74YMr-BmJjvUseRRoC6KcQAvD_BwE

A website from Arizona State University, describing their program for schools to outsource areas of learning. We are not endorsing this program, but provide this link to illustrate this type of approach.

Lafley A. G. & Martin, R. L. (2013). *Playing to Win: How Strategy Really Works*,. Cambridge: Harvard Business Review Press.

Martin, R. (2020). "Is the Opposite of Your Choice Stupid on its Face?" <https://medium.com/the-innovation/is-the-opposite-of-your-choice-stupid-on-its-face-5b247ffd7f94>, retrieved December 17, 2020

Resources

www.christenseninstitute.org/

The section on Education provides examples of disruptive innovation

About the Authors

Rabbi Dr. Gil Perl has served as the Head of School of Kohelet Yeshiva since 2014. In the summer of 2021 he will be transitioning to new roles as the CEO of the Ades Family Foundation and Founding Head of School of the Jewish Leadership Academy, a specialized Jewish Middle and High School in the Miami area aimed at producing the Jewish leaders of the future.

Rona Milch Novick, PhD is the Dean of the Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration and holds the Raine and Stanley Silverstein Chair in Professional Ethics. A clinical psychologist, she writes and speaks frequently on topics in the intersection of psychology and education.

“ Jewish day schools are, research has shown, powerful identity builders, and I believe that is in very large part a function of the extraordinary role modeling and personal interactions skillful Jewish educators offer.”

Recruitment And Career Advancement During a Worldwide Pandemic

RABBI EITAN LIPSTEIN

Change is difficult. As human beings we favor our comfort zones and crave routine, all in an effort to avoid change and the difficulties that tend to accompany it. This is especially true when one cannot amply prepare for said change, or when the change arrives unexpectedly. Furthermore, change can push one further out of his/her comfort zone when the motivation for said change, as difficult as it may be, does not exist and is forced upon a person.

In my experience as both a teacher and administrator in Jewish day schools, I have found that these sentiments are only amplified when it comes to teachers. Teaching is difficult. The sacrifices that teachers make, and the vulnerability that they are subjected to on a regular basis, only serves to make change that much more uncomfortable. Such sentiments existed prior to COVID-19. Yet, once this pandemic arrived, the comfort zones of human beings were detonated, and few have been impacted the way teachers have.

It is in this context that the idea that an educator would voluntarily elect to make a change in his/her career, particularly at this uncertain juncture, seems rather insane. Amidst worldwide

uncertainty and uneasiness, it would seem natural to lean on the routine and ‘certainties’ of one’s life, however mythical that certainty may be. Yet, in doing so, one severely limits his/her opportunities for growth and fulfillment.

I found myself in this scenario, as I sat at a professional crossroads during the pandemic. While I was fortunate to begin the process of changing my professional position prior to the national quarantine, I was not offered a position that was a compelling option to advance my career before the shutdown was in place. To complicate matters, the position I was exploring was on the West Coast, and as I live on the East Coast, a major challenge would be involved in taking the next steps. Air travel was infrequent and frightening, which made visiting the prospective employing school and community with my wife a difficult proposition.

How does one seriously consider moving an entire family, and the lives and home built around said family, to the opposite coast of the country with few friends and no family to provide support and keen insight? How does one develop a sense of a school that is estranged from its campus and currently lives only in a Zoom room? How does one build a rapport with, and develop instincts about, the various stakeholders within the school without in-person meetings? As Simon Sinek said, “Trust doesn’t happen in the Zoom room.” Trust is everything in relationship-building, the very essence of school administration and critical when considering career moves.

While uncertainty and discomfort made seeking a career move foolish, especially one so disparate from my current position and region, to wait until the pandemic concluded seemed like equally foolish decision. There was no more certainty about vaccines, their effectiveness and availability, and the extent of the ripple effect that Covid-19 would leave in its wake. Through the guidance of mentors and confidants, my wife and I committed to do all we could to get a sense of the new school and community we were considering. In turn, the school contacted references and those who could provide information on my viability as a candidate.

Once the school felt confident about continuing with my candidacy, and graciously offered the position, we remained in close to contact, as I tried and they suggested creative ways to gather information about the school and community, as well as potential travel windows as the Covid-19 curve began to flatten at the start of the 2020 summer. Yet, after an immediate uptick, it became exceedingly clear, to our family and the school, that travel might not be an option.

It would have been understandable for the school to push for a decision or pivot to other candidates, yet they were increasingly empathetic to the complexity of the situation and the decision that my family faced. Towards that end, the school allowed us to confidentially reach out to families in the area, and school community, to ascertain that our family would transition well and fit in the community. Experiencing the understanding and warmth from the

school triggered a sense of trust, as they exuded authentic care and concern for our situation, rather than solely focusing on their desires, needs and general timeline.

The genuine empathy and care expressed via the actions of the school proved vital in our comfort accepting the position, and provides insight into best practices for recruitment and retention, pandemic or not. Ultimately, the prospective hire, whether teacher or administrator, is hoping to feel comfortable and seeking the presence of avenues for long-term support. While such sentiments are more easily felt in-person, there are creative actions schools and potential employers can take to aid the process, such as those that we experienced.

Even with the complicating factors that virtual visits and interviews present, there are elements of this option that can simplify the process. Being able to begin interviews virtually, or meeting with shareholders in breakout rooms, can move the process in the right direction without the stress and expense of complex itinerary planning. This is especially true when a candidate would be missing daily classes that would require substitutes, or other responsibilities that would need coverages. Beginning the process virtually protects confidentiality for an extended period of time, as travel plans and site visits tend to dictate the timeline for when all involved are made aware of the applicant's candidacy.

Virtual site visits and interviews also allow for more creativity and time flexibility, especially when operating in

different time zones. Many times, on a site visit, candidates follow the itinerary that the school creates, which may not include meetings, or the ability to gather information with community figures (e.g. Shul Rabbi or a local real estate agent) or even parents/students within the school. Virtual visits allow for the meetings to be tailor-made to the concerns and interests of the school and candidate, streamlining the information-gathering process and making potentially more efficient inroads between school and candidate.

Despite the warning of Simon Sinek about the difficulty of building trust in the virtual environment, certainly feelings of comfort and sentiments of care can be communicated. Quality control, or lack thereof, can be detected on a virtual site visit. In the field of Jewish education, where the work centers around people and genuine connections, building authentic trust is critical. The field has worked tirelessly this year to find new ways to build relationships, to engage and support. This is so important for our schools and our students, and perhaps especially important as we approach professional recruitment even at a distance.

Reflections on Recruitment and Career Advancement

SCOTT J. GOLDBERG, PHD

Rabbi Eitan Lipstein identifies several challenges of virtual professional recruitment and job searches and the remarkable accommodations made due to the Covid pandemic. School leadership searches would benefit greatly from a review of current methods so that we all recognize the potential for recruitment and interviewing to be an amazing first step in the onboarding process.

When a wo/man searches for a spouse, s/he will often generate a list of qualities and characteristics that s/he believe will best suit them. However, the wo/man often does not stop to consider whether that ideal aspirational partner would want to marry her/him. So too in our schools and with our leadership candidates. Of course, there are ideals and every school may wish to identify those and shoot for the stars; every candidate may wish to identify the ideal school in the ideal community. Too often, though, there is a serious mismatch and schools find applicants to fall short of their ideal because the school itself does not have a realistic perspective of itself and what it would take to recruit and hire the ideal candidate. Likewise, a candidate will often be disappointed to learn that a school is not interested in pursuing her/him. Even when there is a good fit, it is not enough

to just expect the match to move forward. Such assumptions will likely lead to disappointing outcomes.

Here are some adjustments and corrections schools should consider to increase the success of their recruitment efforts.

- **Active recruitment.** Schools must actively recruit candidates, not just advertise and wait for candidates to apply. The best candidates are often not looking to move, as they are happy and successful in their current role. Candidates appreciate the role of search firms/consultants and typically view it as a sign of the professionalism of the school when such recruitment efforts are in place
- **Budgeting above the market.** Schools should consider not only base salary at the market or higher rate, but also full tuition remission, full health benefits, a reasonable matching pension contribution, moving costs, school car lease or allowance, school cell phone or allowance, a leadership coach and other professional development opportunities (e.g., conferences, graduate school, etc.), and benefits to entice quality candidates to their institution. Providing even small benefits like gym membership (to encourage a healthy lifestyle with breaks and exercise), tickets to local sporting events and/or cultural programming/theater, and similar perks are appreciated by candidates.
- **Tailoring interviews.** The process of interviewing often does not progress deeply enough to fully appreciate the qualifications of a candidate, his/

her ability to succeed in the various aspects of the job, and how the candidate works with the team. Rather, each stakeholder interview seems to be a repeat first-round interview with a slightly different focus based on the idiosyncratic interests of that stakeholder. Even as rounds of interviews progress, as new stakeholders enter the process, they often use their time to get to know the candidate through a repeat of the same initial/basic questions. The conversations do not advance the school's understanding of the candidate. Rather, schools should consider initial interviews as the only real interviews and set up simulations for future rounds, including days on site. Meetings with various stakeholders that delve into real cases, grapple with real issues, engage in real planning and work will advance the school's understanding of a candidate and allow the stakeholders to quickly learn about the "fit" of the candidate for the team and with the school culture. Likewise, candidates will get to see if they can do the job and how they work with the team and fit into the culture of the school.

- **The visit.** Site visits both during the search and after the hire is made, should include connecting candidates and their spouses to peers and potential friends, introducing them to real estate agents, and generally wining and dining candidates. This relatively small investment will make a huge difference in showing the candidate that you really want them

in your community and will provide a real sense of who you are and how it might feel to become a part of your community.

Collectively, these moves represent a realization by schools waiting for candidates to prove themselves to the school is an ineffective stance, rather the school must prove itself and “sell” itself to the candidates.

I think it is also worth noting that sometimes the best move for a school is to promote from within. Indeed, a cultural fit is so challenging to find so if you already have that in a budding leader and can identify the areas of growth necessary for success and the supports to provide through external coaching/consulting and internal development, a school will likely be best served through an internal hire. Of course, the aforementioned approach to salary and benefits and “wining and dining” are still encouraged. Once married, we should never take our partner for granted. Likewise, we should provide our current employees with the necessary investment in salary, benefits, and professional development to keep them in your school and not looking for next somewhere else.

Research, Readings and Resources

Research

CASJE Research Brief Series (Accessed at www.casje.org/category/research) – including:

- Jewish Vision and Values in Jewish Day School Leadership
- Teacher Satisfaction and the Promise of Jewish Leadership How “Second-in-Command” Leaders in Jewish Day Schools Spend Their Time and Why it Matters

Readings

Scott, Kim. (2019). *Radical candor: How to get what you want by saying what you mean*. London, England: Pan Books.

Goldsmith, M., & Reiter, M. (2015). *Triggers: Creating behavior that lasts—becoming the person you want to be*. New York, NY: Crown Business.

Goldsmith, M., & Reiter, M. (2007). *What got you here won't get you there: How successful people become even more successful*. New York, NY: Hyperion.

Resources

www.theedadvocate.org/33-interview-questions-that-will-help-you-find-effective-principals/ Sample questions for interviews. All questions should be tailored for your specific setting.

About the Authors

Rabbi Eitan Lipstein—received his MS from Azrieli in May 2012, and enrolled in the Azrieli Doctoral Program shortly thereafter. Eitan recently defended his dissertation to his esteemed committee of Azrieli professors and will be awarded his EdD in Educational Leadership. Over the last eight years, Rabbi Lipstein has served as a teacher and administrator at The Moriah School, in Englewood, New Jersey. Rabbi Lipstein is the incoming Principal of Limudei Kodesh at Yeshivat Yavneh, in Los Angeles, where he and his family will excitedly begin their new journey this summer.

Scott J. Goldberg, PhD—is an Associate Professor at the Azrieli Graduate School. Dr. Goldberg is an active teacher, researcher, and consultant in areas including: Hebrew literacy, differentiated instruction, school governance and finance, leadership, strategic planning, religious and spiritual development, and social/behavioral functioning. Scott is deeply involved with leadership transition planning, recruitment/search, placement/hiring, and ongoing coaching of school leaders at all levels as a consultant to many schools. This has and continues to include supporting Yeshivat Yavneh of Los Angeles in the hiring of Rabbi Lipstein before and continuing through the Covid-19 pandemic, as described in his essay above.

Mental Health Musings...

CARLY SOLOWIEJCZYK-NAMDAR

Temporal distancing is a technique I've learned to implement, as I try to fast forward and imagine how I will look back at this time, and what I will likely remember. I wonder if it will be the wailing sirens in my neighborhood, day and night, and the fear that gripped us. I wonder if it will be the sleepless nights as we prayed and longed for loved ones, counting our blessings and appreciating all that we had. Covid-19 both uprooted and solidified our understanding of our purpose and place in this world; with all of its disruptions, stressors and challenges it elevated the role of resilience to front and center in our path to recovery. I hope that I will remember more than the frightening experiences we endured, but the sacred and authentic spaces we created, in which we embraced our vulnerability, realized G-d was in control, gave strength to ourselves and those around us and engaged in dialogue that shattered stigma around mental health, that I pray will far outlive this pandemic.

As a Jewish educator and mental health professional, I have long held beliefs about the power of supportive relationships and belonging in facilitating meaningful and engaging learning experiences. Educators, mental health professionals and administrators have humanized the struggle that this pandemic has induced and have gone above and beyond caused to make themselves

available for each other and for their students, all while juggling their own families and personal responsibilities in a way that blurred boundaries and stretched the hours of the day. We all dug deep and embraced the idea that feeling genuinely accepted, nurtured and connected within a school community is crucial to recovery, resilience and growth. We all experienced an unprecedented "shared traumatic reality" (Baum, 2010) with our students, as we helped them cope with the crisis, trauma, and stress the pandemic induced while living through it ourselves. We innovated and sacrificed to make the remote learning experience as engaging as possible, amidst our own struggles and uncertainty.

Schools without walls were born, as we pivoted and brought the warmth and sense of community into our students' homes and allowed students to share a piece of their homes with us. We all began to realize that education is life itself, as we worked our way through the endless days. Digital learning definitely broadened the scope of what schools could do in terms of education, but we all knew that the joy of being together safely in person was something that so many of us longed for and needed.

When we prepared for school reopening, we took time to reflect on what drives the success we've experienced with our students. Our communal hubs of learning that define the Jewish schooling experience are home to rituals, routines and relationships that are both sacred and grounding, and pave way for the joy and wonder we all anticipate as we return to school each year. The care-

ful and deliberate planning in which we engaged before school opened was a labor of listening, as we surveyed our families about supporting them and their children and learned so much about partnering with parents. I was humbled by the challenges that our families, faculty and students faced and overcame, and quickly realized that we may have just scratched the tip of the iceberg, as stressors tend to linger, but we powered on. I recall speaking to teachers about adopting a stance of radical compassion and flexibility as we focused on reintegration and worked to ensure that we all felt emotionally connected and able to reacclimate to our new socially distanced 2020 reality, with the possibility of quarantine consistently looming. Even when we were approaching compassion fatigue, we modelled coping skills, actively promoting resilience, leaning in to each other and our communities of practice to truly elevate the role of educators as those on the frontlines.

The new school year brought opportunities to reflect my students, listening intently to my students' understanding of the unprecedented times in which we were living, and how they navigated the instability and uncertainty around them. I learned the power of listening, and was strengthened by my students' retelling of the opportunities they found to search for meaning, cultivate a growth mindset and discover coping tools they never knew they had. The more listening I did, the more I realized that creating safe spaces where we could all be our whole authentic selves was key to our healing and making our schools beacons of warmth, mental health and support.

Tending to the mental health needs within the school community became a delicate dance of reaching out to see what others might need, and sharing resources that were aligned with where people were truly at.

True to a trauma-informed school environment, we all learned to approach concerns with curiosity and exploration, wondering why students may have been acting the way they were, what may have been driving their behavior, and giving them ownership and voice in the process. In the process, I believe we all grew a sense of shared ownership for caring for each other and developed a renewed focus on creating the conditions for all of us to flourish, as our schools transformed to prioritize and destigmatize self-care and relationships before academic rigor. I pray that approach we have taken this year will pave the way for cultivating more compassionate, inclusive and welcoming classrooms for many years to come. While we often think of ourselves as thinking creatures that feel, this year we have learned that above all else, we are feeling creatures that think, and we have embraced our emotional needs and made space for the needs of others. I believe the future ahead of us is very bright, as the resilience we have developed will allow us to continue to positively adapt and regain our ability to thrive and innovate, with room for positive growth and transformation. Let us not forget the tireless progress we have made, the openness and priorities we have recognized, and the potential for so much more.

Positive Leadership: Lessons from Positive Psychology

DAVID PELCOVITZ, PHD

Carly Solowiejczyk-Namdar eloquently shared the approach of a talented psychologist and educational leader in bringing the lessons of positive psychology to foster resilience and healing in a school coping with the chronic stress of the pandemic. My focus will be on what positive psychology teaches us about the core ingredients of effective school leadership. In recent years there has been an explosion of research documenting how when leaders foster a positive climate in the workplace every member of the school community—students, educators, support staff and parents—are more engaged, happier, healthier, and creative.

We will focus on three relevant areas with illustrations from various studies and Jewish sources.

Seeing the Positive

Recent research in neuroscience has documented how the default setting in our interaction with others is to focus on the negative. We are hard wired to have our thoughts and emotions driven by the alarm centers in our nervous system that notice problems and narrow our focus. In contrast, top-down thinking is characterized by a focus on what is right. Bottom-up informed approaches in

schools include focusing on failure without recognizing and supporting success. When a top-down approach is utilized, and strengths are systematically recognized and engaged higher levels of happiness, grit and engagement emerge.

In the *Tzidkos Hatzadik* (71,#154) Rabbeinu Tzadok highlights the importance of fostering confidence and belief in one's abilities:

“Just like we need to believe in God, so too do we need to believe in ourselves, to believe that God is involved with us, that we aren't an insignificant being here one day and gone the next”.

Gratitude

Numerous benefits stem from building the capacity for gratitude into the culture of a school. Those who regularly express gratitude are more likely to be forgiving, generous, agreeable, and less likely to be narcissistic and selfish, all traits that promote a thriving school community. The enemy of gratitude is habituation. The human brain quickly becomes accustomed to even the most spectacular of gifts. School leaders can easily take for granted the hard work of a child, parent, or faculty member and, conversely, it is easy to forget the opportunities and support offered by a school leader.

Handling Mistakes and Failure: Cultivating Forgiveness

A school climate that responds to mistakes as a source of learning and growth cultivates a culture of forgiveness.

When sociologist, Dr. Sam Oliner, was twelve years old the Nazis came into his town, Bobowa, in southern Poland, and murdered his family and virtually all the members of his community. He managed to escape and was taken in by a Polish gentile family who immediately sheltered him at tremendous risk to their life and the life of their entire family. As an adult, Oliner dedicated his career to researching what the active ingredients were in the childhoods of these moral giants. Oliner found a crucial contributor was how their parents handled their mistakes. When they did something that violated the moral code of the family their parents patiently explained what was wrong with their behavior and conveyed a clear belief in their child's ability to engage in a teshuva process that would repair the mistake by making appropriate apologies and righting the wrong done to the injured party. Thriving, positively led schools foster work climates that are characterized by an environment that handles the inevitable mistakes and wrongdoings of members of the school community by calmly suggesting corrective action while simultaneously communicating a belief in the power of forgiveness.

The paradigms of positive psychology offer three powerful tools that can improve school climate both during trauma—such as a pandemic, and in the normal course of business. These approaches offer benefits for leaders and those under their care.

Research, Readings and Resources

Research

Owens, R. L. & Waters, L. (2020) What does positive psychology tell us about early intervention and prevention with children and adolescents? A review of positive psychological interventions with young people. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 15:5, 588-597, DOI: 10.1080/17439760.2020.1789706

Dr. Lea Waters, a member of Dr. Martin Seligman's positive psychology team at Penn, has systematically applied the principles of positive psychology in school settings. This paper reviews seminal work in this area providing helpful developmental and theoretical considerations for using positive psychology in school and clinical settings.

Vazquez, C. (2021) Post Traumatic Growth and Stress Related Responses During the Covid-19 Pandemic in a National Representative Sample: The Role of Positive Core Beliefs About the World and Others.

A nationally representative sample of adults from Spain was used to explore the role of post-traumatic growth in coping with covid. Beliefs about a good world, openness to the future and identification with humanity were associated with PTG; while suspiciousness, intolerance of uncertainty, and anxiety about death were associated with post-traumatic stress symptoms and consequent impairment.

Aten, J. D.; Smith, W. R.; Davis, E. B.; Van Tongeren, D.R.; Hook, J. N.; Davis, D. E.; Shannonhouse, L.; DeBlaere, C.; Ranter, J.; O'Grady, K.; Hill, P. C.; (2019). The psychological study of religion and spirituality in a disaster context: A systematic review. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 11(6), 597-613.

A systematic review of the role of religion and spirituality in coping with disaster led to valuable conclusions for educators trying to have a deeper understanding of supporting their school community during trying times. Religion and spirituality serve as a positive resource for helping disaster survivors make sense of and cope with natural and human-made disasters. However, negative religious coping, as well as certain types of views of God, religious appraisals, and changes in religiosity over time were all associated with more negative mental, physical, and spiritual outcomes. This valuable review helps tease out the complex interplay of religion and spirituality as a source of hope and resilience as well as a potential source of risk.

Collie, R. J., Shapka, J. D., Perry, N. E., (2012). School climate and social-emotional learning: Predicting teacher stress, job satisfaction, and teaching efficacy. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 104, (4), 1189-1204.

This widely cited study examines how teachers' perceptions of social-emotional learning and climate in their schools influenced teachers' perceived stress, feeling of competence and confidence in their ability as a teacher. Level of comfort on the part of teachers in implementing SEL had the most powerful impact as did teachers' perceptions of workload and teaching efficacy.

Readings/Viewings

www.youtube.com/watch?v=nzTcA673j9U
Video describing the Geelong Grammar School Positive Education Approach

Seligman, M. (2002). *Authentic Happiness*. New York: Simon & Schuster

Resources

Four Pillars of Wellbeing Curriculum. <https://contentment.org/program> This organization offers content and training in the four-pillars of well-being curriculum. Research on the impact of the curriculum, a whole-school approach, can be found at:

Bradley, C., & Cordaro, D. T. (2020). Impacts of the four pillars of wellbeing curriculum: A 3-year pilot study. *Translational Issues in Psychological Science*, 6(4), 404–411. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tps0000275>

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). www.casel.org – compendium of research and curricular resources for schools and educators

Positive Education: <https://positivepsychology.com/what-is-positive-education/>

Website with information and resources on the application of positive psychology in schools.

About the Authors

Carly Solowiejczyk-Namdar is an educational psychologist and a doctoral candidate at the Azrieli Graduate School of Education. Carly was recently awarded the Robert M. Sherman Young Pioneer Award from the Jewish Education Project in 2020 for her work in the field of social-emotional learning. Carly is currently completing her doctoral studies as a means to combine her passion for Jewish education and positive psychology and promote holistic wellbeing throughout school communities.

David Pelcovitz holds the Straus Chair in psychology and education and is a full professor at the Azrieli Graduate School. He teaches Master's and Doctoral students at Azrieli as well as students at the Rabbi Issac Elhanan Talmudic Seminary.

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