



Azrieli

Azrieli Graduate School
of Jewish Education
and Administration

SPECIAL EDITION
THE AZRIELI PAPERS

Covid-19 & Chinuch

LESSONS LEARNED
OPPORTUNITIES UNCOVERED

VOLUME I

Teaching & Learning



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Introduction

The human spirit is remarkable not only for its ability to tolerate stress and survive trauma, but for its ability to learn and grow even in times of upheaval, uncertainty and great challenge. The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted every area of our lives, presenting unimaginable challenges and prompting widespread and rapid change. For children and adolescents, the structure and predictability that school offers was quickly eroded. With no warning or preparation, students and educators experienced the total transformation of the school experience. Yet, through both the Spring 2020 international shutdowns, and with multiple iterations in place in the 2020–2021 school year, students and educators have continued to teach and learn.

This special series of the *Azrieli Papers* highlights the ways in which Covid-19 prompted an examination of Jewish education, including practices and underlying philosophies. The essays in this and the following two volumes offer a view of the lessons we have learned in these uncertain times and the opportunities we have uncovered. Each essay begins with a discussion by educators and educational consumers “on the ground”—sharing their experiences and thoughts. These essays are paired with a companion article by an Azrieli or YU faculty member, offering their thoughts as well as providing research, readings and resources to expand on the topic.

This first volume focuses on teaching and learning, the classroom experience for teachers and students. The first essay pairing by Sharon Freundel and Karen Shawn considers movement towards student-centered teaching and mentoring prompted by Covid which may infuse the field moving forward. The team of educators from Yeshiva University High School for Girls (Hadassah Frankel, Audi Hecht, Leah Mosovich & Bracha Rutner) share the innovations generated by their radical flexibility, further explored by Ilana Turestsky. Considering the opportunity to rethink assessment, Josh Grajower and Scott Goldberg discuss alternative models of evaluating student learning. Mark Hoenig and Moshe Sokolow discuss the ways in which Covid-19 impacted tefillah, and the implications for Jewish education. Recognizing the critical role of the teacher, Yehuda Chanale and Mordechai Schiffman present programmatic and professional development needs and opportunities. Finally, sharing the passion of Jewish educators to inspire and connect with their students, regardless of the challenges any situation provides, Yehuda Deutsch and Laya Salomon offer thoughts on enduring Jewish educational truths.

In the coming months, additional volumes will address other dimensions of Jewish education. The next volume focuses on Leadership, considering the unique issues school principals and others in leadership roles confronted, and continue to confront, in a constantly shifting reality. The final volume in the

series will offers essays on Funding, Families and Community, exploring the ways in which Covid-19 has, could, or will, change how we envision and finance Jewish education, and how we connect to families and communities.

Throughout the pandemic, the Azrieli faculty has connected with scores of Jewish educators and Jewish educational leaders. We have witnessed their stress and their exhaustion as well as their dedication and creativity. We dedicate this special edition of the Azrieli Papers to them. To every Jewish educator who zoomed to their students, who masked or behind partitions imparted words of Torah, who spent hours redesigning teaching and learning to meet ever-changing needs, even as they struggled

to meet their own needs and those of their families, we offer our admiration and our sincere thank you. We have no doubt that the efforts discussed here, along with the myriad of innovations and work-arounds these past months have prompted, those that were dreamed up and accomplished by hundreds of Jewish educators in Jewish schools, will contribute to continued growth in the field. We hope that we will look back on these dark days and recognize the true light Jewish education was, is, and will always be.

RONA MILCH NOVICK, PhD
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 Education and Administration
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WHERE
 TEACHING
 IS SACRED

WHERE
 LEARNING
 TRANSFORMS

Can Zoom Innovations Change Our Teaching For the Better?

SHARON FREUNDEL

Covid-19 altered a great deal of classroom thinking and planning: in curriculum, in pedagogy, and in priorities. The Jewish educational world will be happy to wave good-bye to some of the changes that coronavirus necessitated; we hope that other changes, prompted by the pandemic, will outlast it and become part of ongoing school practices. The practices discussed here highlight an increase in focus on the student as the center of classroom experiences and applications.

Teaching Students Prioritized

One of the positive changes that we witnessed was educators teaching students, rather than material. Especially towards the beginning of “Zoom school,” teachers realized that holding firm to a curriculum that had been created for a live classroom would not work with each student learning in a different space. Without the dynamic of the in-person community, or the teacher making eye contact, approaching students in physical space, and utilizing body language to convey meaning to a classroom of students, planned lessons fell flat and did not advance students’ learning. Some teachers used this

moment to reimagine teaching. While keeping their curriculum in mind, they focused much more on the individual students, each with their own unique needs and ways of doing things, and each experiencing their own at-home circumstances and realities.

Teachers created activities and utilized various digital tools to craft assignments that students could complete within a set time frame, but at their own pace and during their preferred work time. They kept the frontal aspect of lessons as short as possible, allowing students to make progress toward mastery under potentially quite challenging circumstances. For example, some students could access computers only at certain times during the day; others did not have a quiet space in which to work until a particular hour, and still others were forced to deal with illness, family strife, and their own anxieties. By providing some autonomy and sense of control to the students, teachers helped them complete their assignments and accomplish their personal goals.

Recognizing Students’ Need for Socialization

Because many teachers prioritized students’ emotional needs, they consciously created socialization moments among peers as well as between each of the students and themselves—something that occurred organically in the classroom, but needed to be finessed when virtual. For example, many teachers built socialization time into classes so that students could connect with the friends whom they were missing

fiercely. Some teachers set up weekly or bi-weekly check-ins with each student; a critical strategy for elevating students' learning, evidenced by the advantages of relational teaching as outlined by Responsive Classroom, the Taos Institute, and others. Especially when physically distanced, it proved important for teachers to sit with each student to evaluate where they are in their learning and their lives. Even when we are back to being together in our classrooms, social interaction among students and individual check-ins between teachers and students should continue and be built into each teacher's and student's schedule.

Rethinking Assessment and Creating Opportunities

Prior to Covid, many schools had still been utilizing pen-to-paper or online in-person numerically-graded tests. Once school went virtual, this was not an option, as it might be too easy for students to cheat while online with no adult supervision present. As a result, many teachers stopped "teaching to the test" and, given that latitude, began allowing broader discussions in class. They were able to explore the values and wisdom inherent in and emanating from the material rather than just explaining the material. Such values and wisdom will remain with children long after their schooling is complete. Most of us who attended Jewish day schools as children don't remember which sefer (book of the Torah) we learned each year, but we remember the moral wisdom we acquired, how the teacher conveyed Jewish values, and how those lessons made us

think and feel. In addition, since Covid sidelined customary testing, many schools switched to more creative assessments, which became tools of learning in addition to evaluation. This is, in fact, a better practice, as children invest more of themselves when completing a creative or analytical assessment than they do when merely recording memorized facts.

From Frontal to Student-Centered

Finally, frontal instruction fell out of favor; something which should have happened long ago. Frontal teaching in Zoom school became so boring, insipid, dull, and dry that neither students nor teachers could tolerate it. No one was learning because it was too easy for both the givers and the receivers to tune out. It became clear that lessons had to be creative, engaging, and interactive. Examples of such interactive teaching include using apps such as Padlet, Jamboard, and Flipgrid; sharing videos with or without software such as EdPuzzle; and effective use of Zoom break-out rooms for small groups of students to work together to explore the topics at hand. All of these options enfranchised students, giving them some agency over their own learning.

Imagine a future in which coronavirus has receded such that it is no longer a threat and we are back in brick and mortar classes once more. But also imagine a Jewish educational landscape where the vast majority if not all educators continue their Covid-prompted changes, where they teach students rather than subjects and continue doing one-on-one check-

ins with each student; where assessments involve student creativity and agency and 45-minute frontal lessons are a thing of the past. What a wonderful world it would be!



Ensuring a Student-Centered Future

KAREN SHAWN, PhD

Sharon Freundel’s essay asks us to “imagine a future” where student-centered teaching is the norm. This prompts a question: What are we doing now, and what further changes are necessary, to ensure this future?

I believe through her work at the JEIC and my experience at the Azrieli Graduate School, Sharon and I recognize that for many Jewish educators, student-centered teaching is very much a reality. At the Azrieli Graduate School, we teach our pre- and in-service student teachers how to design student-centered classrooms, safe and secure communities of trusted and trusting peers, where each student is known and respected, where social and emotional learning is integrated into lessons, where diversity is acknowledged and welcomed, where mistakes are valued as learning tools, where questions and conversations are encouraged, and where successes are

celebrated. Our graduates make use of frontal teaching as necessary to present an anticipatory set, give directions, explain concepts, or contextualize a lesson, even as they just as often offer numerous opportunities for engaged, active, and interactive learning such as turn-talk-and-task activities, think-alouds, stations, group and chevruta learning, Socratic dialogue, fishbowl, and project-based learning (PBL), along with myriad tools of technology that further their teaching goals. Other teacher-education programs embrace many, if not all, of these philosophies and approaches as well. Why, then, is student-centered teaching not universal?

One reason is a lack of ongoing mentorship and support for new graduates and early-career teachers. New teachers often enter a well established system that may not welcome techniques that require time, understanding, and commitment to implement. Faculty, administrators, board members, and parents must be introduced to unfamiliar but effective student-centered pedagogic strategies. Schedules must change to allow teachers to meet formally to share curricular ideas, lessons, and student progress. Teachers must be willing to open their classroom doors for their peers to watch them teach and share their thoughts about the lesson they observe. Parents must become aware of the benefits of affective and other nontraditional methods to measure learning outcomes.

This is not an easy task. When teachers incorporate new and student-centered ideas into their classrooms, they often confront the still-prevalent expectation

of good teaching to which many administrators, parents, and teachers adhere: The teacher stands in the front of the room; her lecture is clear and crisp; her aim and her notes are neatly written on the board. Her students sit quietly in neat rows facing front, listening, with their pens at the ready and workbooks open. Student-centered, constructivist classrooms, on the other hand, are often beehives of activity, with the teacher circulating to see and discuss the work of students who are happily at stations or sitting or standing in pairs or groups, actively discussing or debating the topic at hand, or writing, reading, drawing, painting, and researching, without a workbook in sight!

To realize this vision in more Jewish day schools, a university-school partnership would be ideal. It would allow faculty to continue to mentor their recent graduates, working with them as they incrementally implement aspects of this student-center approach and helping the larger school community to see its value. Such continued mentorship will offer significant dividends, but requires a substantial investment of funds and energy that will likely only be possible through innovative funding structures and partnerships.

Even without such investment, there are forward-thinking yeshivot and day schools that do encourage their new faculty to share what they know to be good practice; other faculty members are eager to implement what they see in these engaged classrooms. Some of our graduates serve as mentors, teacher-leaders who provide on-site support to colleagues who see the great benefits

in this way of teaching but are not sure how to begin. They open their classrooms to peer-observers and are available to restructure colleagues' lesson plans from a student-centered perspective. But teachers need more mentoring and support if we are to reinvigorate more of our classrooms.

In our Ed.D. program in educational leadership, we hear from new and seasoned administrators, who are often parents as well, how much they value the idea of student-centered, constructivist classrooms, but how difficult the challenges sometimes are when they champion them in their schools. More programs for leadership development need to promote similar understanding of and commitment to student-centered, whole-child approaches; on-going support and mentorship for school leaders is as important as it is for teachers.

The classrooms Freundel envisions have long been a fact in many day schools. Engaging and interactive centers of learning graced these schools before the pandemic shuttered them and will continue to grow and flourish in the aftermath. As we look to the future, we seek ways to expand that reality to more classrooms and additional schools to benefit all of our students.

Research, Readings, and Resources

Research

Jones, M. G., & Bradeer-Araje, L. (2002). The impact of constructivism on education: language, discourse, and meaning. *American Communication Journal*, 5(3).

A seminal article describing the widespread adoption of constructivist methods and definitions and implications of the approach.

Keiler, L. S. (2018). Teachers' roles and identities in student-centered classrooms *International Journal of STEM Education*, 5, Article number: 34

Accessed at: stemeducationjournal.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s40594-

"A wonderful description of the transition of 13 high school STEM teachers to a student-centered model, including the challenges, mentoring necessary, and impact on student outcomes.

A Qualitative Study of Student-Centered Learning Practices in New England High Schools. (2015). University of Massachussets Donahue Institute. A very thorough report addressing questions of implementation and those factors necessary to support successful implementation. Accessed at: www.issuelab.org/resources/25815/25815.pdf

Readings

Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of Meaning*. The Jerusalem—Harvard lectures. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Dewey, J. (1997). *Experience & education*. Glencoe, Ill: Free Press.

Greene, M. (2018). *Variations on a blue guitar: The Lincoln Center Institute lectures on aesthetic education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Hein, G. E. (1991). *Constructivist Learning Theory*. Paper presented at the International Committee of Museum Educators Conference, Jerusalem, 15–22 October, 1991.

McLeod. S. (2019). *Constructivism as a theory for teaching and learning*. www.simplypsychology.org/constructivism.html.

Resources

Palmer, P. J. (2017). *The courage to teach*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; 20th edition.

www.commonsense.org/education/top-picks/great-student-centered-learning-resources

www.educationevolving.org/content/resources-on-student-centered-learning-greatest-hits

<https://studentsatthecenterhub.org/resource/equity-resource-bundle/>

About the Authors

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Radical Flexibility: Embracing New Approaches

HADASSAH FRANKEL,
AUDI HECHT, LEAH MOSKOVICH,
AND BRACHA RUTNER

Times of crisis oftentimes bring to light many positive outcomes as people are compelled to embrace the challenge they are confronted with and adapt in an optimal way. This can manifest in terms of increased ingenuity as solutions to the crisis are ideated, greater productivity as certain needs become more pressing, the emergence of the inherent goodness of mankind as people seek to help their fellow citizens, and greater unity. The Covid-19 Pandemic presented a veritable tsunami to the lives of people around the world. The world of education in particular, was tasked with the need to continue educating our students but in a manner that required the entire school community to reimagine education in many ways. Entire towns became the new school buildings, parents assumed both teaching and administrative roles, and students were compelled to commit to virtual learning. While remote learning is hardly a new phenomenon, entire brick and mortar schools transforming into virtual communities during the lockdown phase, was indeed a monumental feat, and presented numerous challenges. Some of these included how to engage students from afar, and while they may be experiencing social and emotional

challenges from the isolating effects of social distancing. It required efforts to maintain academic standards and integrity. It propelled schools to consider new ways to create a school environment and spirit through connecting students amidst their living spaces with the cloud of the pandemic hovering over. Yeshiva University High School for Girls (Central) was devoted to providing the best academic and social-emotional experience despite these new challenges. Below, we share several areas that were addressed in response to the changes brought on by the new realities of the pandemic.

Academics and Professional Development

In March, our teachers were forced to pivot quickly to try new technologies and approaches to teaching and learning. There was tremendous support offered from our Director of Technology and a plethora of professional development opportunities available online. Many were focused on practical and useful professional development that could provide our faculty with tips and skills to use in their new virtual classrooms. Many teachers dabbled in technologies that they had only thought about but were nervous or felt uncomfortable trying in real time. This shifted their mindset and many teachers were willing to take risks and try out new ideas because they could, and because this was an opportunity for them to finally do so. Central started having weekly Zoom meetings with our faculty to check in and see how their classes were going and if anyone wanted to share a new tool they had

learned. This was also an opportunity to share information with the faculty about reopening plans. These meetings have continued weekly throughout the school year. This is an opportunity for them to see each other, as many don't share offices anymore and, because of Covid-19 restrictions and new schedules, don't have the chance to talk with each other. In our meetings we share important information which is better explained in person than in an email. Teachers can ask questions and provide their own ideas on different topics. This is something that we plan on continuing even after the pandemic, as we found this is a way for us to learn from each other.

In-School Programming

At the beginning of the 2020–2021 school year, it took some time for us to adjust and adapt to our new Covid-school reality. The many restrictions required new and innovative programming. At the same time, we recognized that with so many changes in school and around the world, our students were craving the consistency of familiar programming of previous years, which they had come to enjoy and expect as mainstays of their Central experience. While we started the year off with interactive virtual programs, we hit our programming stride when a colleague from a different school shared her idea of running a Shabbaton “Covid-Style”.

We ran to develop the concept, and our “*Erev Shabb-A-Tonim*” were born. For each individual grade, we created a Shabbaton experience with a unique theme, learning activities, schedule,

food, and grade-fun, starting late Thursday and continuing into the whole day on Friday. We had our students and faculty dress for Shabbat on Friday, turn off and hand in their cell phones, walk to the Young Israel of Jamaica Estates, and engage in a day of Shabbaton learning, fun, and food. Despite the masks and social distancing, the students truly felt that this was an authentic Shabbaton-esque experience, and they were able to step away from Covid life for some time and immerse themselves in a “regular” and “normal” Shabbaton experience. This programming experience taught us that creatively adapting our programming to be Covid-safe while still maintaining as many pre-Covid elements and traditions as possible is the best blend for programming during this Covid school year.

Out of School Programming

The Central spirit continues daily past the 5:10 pm bell. After-School programming has always been an integral part of our planning and budget. In a normal year, we run nightly clubs, have an extensive science and athletics program, and host community and alumnae *shiurim* in our school building. Due to Covid-19, we have been restricted from allowing guests into our building and the mixing of grades. On a dime, we turned all of our clubs virtual, created grade-by-grade athletic clinics, updated the lab to meet all health requirements, and expanded our learning programming on Zoom. The most impressive adaptation to date has been our virtual alumnae *shiurim* and community

Mishmar programming. Our alumnae programming has increased in participation from about 5-7 students in-person, to 20-25 per week on Zoom. We have always struggled to engage alumnae in our programming, so this is an impressive improvement. Our community *Mishmar* events on Zoom have featured speakers from all over the world, which has been a wonderful advantage of the Zoom platform and has increased participation significantly. Our *Mishmar* events used to be held monthly, bringing in around 15-20 students and parents, and are now weekly, bringing in close to 85 participants, and learning much more Torah together. This past summer, when so many students had no summer plans, we created a Central Scholars Summer Program, featuring daily *shiurim* by our devoted faculty members, and nightly *Mishmar* events, bringing in countless students and alumnae each week. What this “out-of-school” experience has taught us is the power and need for connection — both in high school and beyond. Girls, parents, and alumnae are eager to “see” their teachers, peers, and learn together, laugh together, and create together — without the barriers of masks and distancing. More than just being convenient, the opportunities have been extensive, and we hope to continue with some of these virtual programs for years to come.

Central’s success in creating a vibrant community of learners amidst the current climate can be attributed to a variety of factors. Adopting an approach of “radical flexibility” was a recurring theme and allowed for all members of the

school community to try new methods, to redesign existing models, and to tackle the limitations presented by the pandemic. We are proud of the results and look forward to implementing new models and ideas as needed, and to enriching our school experience in all of the areas cited above and in additional domains.



Meeting Challenge with Solutions

ILANA TURETSKY, EdD

The article written collaboratively by members of the faculty and administration at YUHSG Central High School demonstrates a solution-oriented mindset in the face of new and different challenges. In a variety of ways, Central sought to overcome these challenges through creative means and through harnessing the resources and opportunities available to them.

Throughout the article, a number of in-the-box and out-of-the-box strategies are shared. Beneath these concrete suggestions, there are, I believe, three important lessons that I would like to outline as they are likely relevant to a large cross-section of schools, beyond the specific demographics of Central.

A Recipe for Personal and Communal Growth

The authors describe how weekly faculty meetings were established as a way to foster peer communication when face-to-face staff interaction was not possible, a practice they plan to continue after the pandemic. I was struck by the irony that it was specifically a situation of isolation that yielded newfound closeness. In the isolation, forums and opportunities for togetherness had to be proactively created, some of which exceeded the previous ‘togetherness’ structures that existed, even though these previous structures afforded the opportunity for physical proximity. This underscores the idea that when we have to work for something, the outcome is often of higher quality than when it falls into our lap. Strength is often built in the face of adversity. Resourcefulness is birthed by deficit. I was recently talking to a student teacher who had worked hard to make tremendous progress in mastering effective pedagogy. He lamented that some teachers seem to have an inborn ability to “wing it” in the classroom, making their teaching seem effortless and easy. We discussed that while that may be true, there are many instances in which the need to be a little more deliberate, the push to understand critical components and to consider how to most effectively implement them, can yield a far superior product. What may initially appear to be a disadvantage may turn out to be a most powerful catalyzer of growth, ultimately leading to successes that would have otherwise been unattainable. That Central turned

a challenge into an opportunity can send a powerful message to students about the journey of growth and the attainment of success.

Teacher Professional Development

When schools were asked to quickly pivot from classical in-school teaching to exclusively virtual learning environments, teachers needed a tremendous amount of support to successfully make this transition. Though we live in era of endless online resources, teachers across the world found themselves intimidated both by the rapid shift that they were expected to make and by the overwhelming on-line guidance available. Like many schools, Central offered support in the form of online professional development and direct support from the director of technology. However, Central did something extremely important in addition: they convened the teachers regularly to discuss how things were going, to collaboratively problem-solve, to discover which tools had worked well and to generally debrief. This professional development model combines ‘ingesting’ and ‘digesting.’ New information and tools and approaches can be interesting and informative. However, the impact of teacher learning is strengthened when there are opportunities not just to learn new skills- to ingest- but to digest as well- to reflect on successes and challenges, to support each other in overcoming roadblocks, and to celebrate each other’s efforts.

Student Programming

“*Erev shabb-a-tonim*.” are a wonderfully creative way to engage students in meaningful, rich, fun programming. In this model, rather than playing with the variable of ‘space,’ i.e. shifting a live experience to a virtual sphere, which is the more common formula for Covid-era programming, ‘time’ was the manipulated variable- hosting a classically Shabbat event on a Thursday/Friday, which made Covid limitations more manageable. “*Erev shabb-a-tonim*” presented an interesting combination of the old and the new. On the one hand, faculty asked themselves what new ideas could be implemented given the unique circumstances; on the other hand, they looked for ways to (re-)integrate the familiar so that students could experience that authentic flavor, take comfort in the

familiar, and create a sense of continuity from the “old” to the “new” reality. This suggests a healthy model for a school whether in times of challenge or not- capitalizing on the traditional, the familiar, on the core things that make us who we are, while daring to be creative and different, demonstrating a willingness to think in new and innovative ways.

Like schools across the world, the educators at Central found themselves facing significant challenges when Covid-19 cast its shadow. By adopting a forward-facing mindset, providing significant and varied support to faculty, and creatively tending to students’ academic and social needs, they demonstrated a steadfast commitment to creating a productive and enriching school experience for their students.

Research, Readings, and Resources

Research

Darling-Hammond, L., & Hylar, M. E. (2020). Preparing educators for the time of Covid... and beyond. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 43(4), 457-465.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2020.1816961>

Research-based strategies for supporting teachers, both at the pre-service and in-service stages, in more effectively addressing students’ academic and social needs. Implications for both the Covid era and beyond are discussed.

Seaton, F. S.(2017). Empowering teachers to implement a growth mindset. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 34(1), 41-57.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2017.1382333>

Findings from a school’s attempt to train teachers in promoting a growth mindset among students.

Readings

Ferlazzo, L. (2015). Response: Change in schools is a process, not an event. *Edweek*, June 18, 2015. Two seasoned educators share perspectives and suggestions for effecting smooth and successful school change. www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/opinion-response-change-in-schools-is-a-process-not-an-event/2015/06

Seton, H. (2021). A Daily ritual that builds trust and community among students. *Edutopia*, January 8, 2021. Shares a powerful tool for creating a sense of trust and community among students, particularly in a distance-learning classroom.

www.edutopia.org/article/daily-ritual-builds-trust-and-community-among-students

Resources

www.oecd.org/education/Supporting-the-continuation-of-teaching-and-learning-during-the-Covid-19-pandemic.pdf

A treasure trove of resources, organized according three categories: (1) curriculum resources, (2) professional development, and (3) ed tech tools. In particular, for a school that is looking to foster in-house learning without the expense of an outside consultant, there are enough resources here to keep the school busy for many years past the anticipated end of the Covid pandemic.

<https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/research-initiatives/covidschools>

Free resources for addressing students' social and emotional needs, in particular (but not limited to) during the Covid-era where students' needs for support and connection are amplified. Resources can be implemented either virtually or in-person, with the goal of nurturing authentic connection and promoting meaningful social-emotional development.

About the Authors

Hadassah Frankel is an Azrieli MS graduate (2016) and a candidate in the EdD program. She teaches Chumash and Navi and serves as Programming Director at Central (YUHSG). Hadassah loves having the opportunity to imagine, plan, and actualize programming that is fun, creative, and meaningful, together with her fantastic colleagues.

Audi Hecht is a candidate in the Azrieli EdD program. She is an educator in the fields of history and political science and serves as Chairperson of the History department at Central where she teaches United States History, US Government and Politics and "We The People of The Book", a course integrating American Jewish History, identity, and civics. A politics enthusiast, Audi enjoys sharing her passion for the inner workings of the American political landscape and crafting civics initiatives with her students and the school community.

Leah R. Moskovich, is an Azrieli MS graduate (2012) and a candidate in the EdD program. She serves as Associate Principal at Central, overseeing the Judaic Studies and Student Life Departments. She also manages the school's events and test calendars, making sure students and faculty have a balanced, happy, and healthy school life experience.

Bracha Rutner, MA, is an EdD candidate at Azrieli Graduate School. She serves as the Head of School at the Yeshiva University High School for Girls, overseeing the educational program, and working with a collaborative team of Associate Principals, Department Chairs and staff to ensure Central students have a well-rounded, meaningful educational experience.

Ilana Turetsky, EdDMS and EdD graduate of Azrieli Graduate School. Full time faculty, Azrieli Graduate School. Dr. Turetsky works with teachers and schools to advance the quality of pedagogy and enhance the student learning experience.

Alternative Assessments: Keys to Success

RABBI JOSH GRAJOWER

Change does not happen overnight—it takes work, effort, and energy. The precise impetus for change, however, is often spontaneous and unexpected. Sometimes a single experience—personal or collective—can inspire or even force dramatic deviations from the norm. Covid-19 and, more specifically, the abrupt transition to remote learning has brought about a transformative challenge to our educational system.

One pivotal area of our educational system is assessment. Innovative methods have certainly received major attention at educational conferences, however testing has remained the *modus operandi* of an overwhelming majority of teachers. As such, the practical ramifications of Covid-19 and the difficulties introduced by remote testing sent many of us into a frenzy and, out of necessity, more and more educators turned to alternative forms of assessment. And, as someone who has long preached passionately about the benefits of alternative forms of assessment, I found this shift to be both welcome and exciting. But, as we return to our respective school buildings, most testing has—unfortunately—reverted to its pre-COVID formatting.

Therefore, I hope to use this article to advocate for the advantages of maintaining and expanding upon the

use of alternative assessments in place of traditional testing. I strongly believe that our reluctance to embrace alternative assessments is largely the result of a collective and fundamental misunderstanding of the tenets and purposes of a successful and effective assessment exercise. To that end, I would like to share some of what I consider to be the keys to formulating productive, appropriate, and sustainable alternatives to traditional testing.

The first major factor in designing an assessment, whether a traditional test or alternative method, is establishing its goal. Is the goal to have students memorize specific facts? Do we want students to understand a comprehensive historical timeline and/or to be able to synthesize information in a more dynamic manner? Are we aiming to foster a deeper, more internalized familiarity? Is the hope that students will form personal connections to the material and apply it to their day-to-day lives? Without a clear picture of the true purpose of the assessment, it becomes much harder to adequately construct the project in a way that guides students towards success.

And perhaps it goes without saying, but it is not enough for the teacher to know the objective; it must also be communicated thoroughly to the students, who are much more likely to put forth effort when they appreciate the reasoning and motivation that dictate the nature of the assignment. Therefore, it is essential to provide them with a lens through which they can reconcile the relationship between their work and the desired outcome.

The second factor is to divide the task into different parts. Too often, teachers simply take the same approach to non-test assessments and tests—delineate the guidelines or requirements and set a time by which the final version is required, or exam is taken. Unlike tests, projects usually involve multiple steps, and a teacher’s ability to divide those distinct elements into manageably defined clusters can benefit students greatly. Depending on the assignment, I will often ask students to turn in three or four different components prior to the final submission. These can vary from simple steps—like topic selection and note taking guides—to more labor-intensive steps, like constructing comprehensive outlines and rough drafts.

The segmentation of the different components of a project helps the students in many ways. For one, it allows them to work on a more viable timeline, as opposed to waiting for the last minute to do it all at once. It also enables teachers to provide feedback throughout the process, which is one of the greatest advantages that projects provide compared to standard test assessments. Teachers can help students improve their work along the way and, in doing so, use the assessment as part of the larger instructive effort (and not simply a way to determine a summative grade). Additionally, when a project is divided into different parts, students receive individual grades for each stage of their progress, meaning it is also a way to acknowledge incremental effort and advancement.

The last major factor to be discussed herein is the need to have a clear standard for the final product from the outset. A teacher must be able to communicate to the students not only the goal and the specific steps, but their vision of an ideal final product, as well. A lack of clarity regarding what they are working towards will both hinder students’ ability to work concisely and dampen their overall effort. The timely establishment and clear definition of expectations are essential to allowing students to thrive.

This can be accomplished by providing a grading rubric, which will help codify the different factors students should be weighing as they work. A good rubric is one which the teacher puts forth as part of the project’s initial assignment and which serves to explicitly outline the preconditions to success. Students must be made aware of the relevant expectations, criteria, and standards prior to beginning the work.

Many teachers’ most ingrained habits and methodologies have been upended because of Covid-19. Even the most veteran among us has admitted feeling anxious, uncomfortable, and overwhelmed by the unfamiliarity of our new realities. And, while we may long for a return to routine and times of greater certainty, hopefully many of the recent, unprecedented challenges can act as a catalyst for constructive changes to our educational system, especially in the field of assessment.

Reflections on Rabbi Josh Grajower's Alternative Assessments: Keys to Success

SCOTT J. GOLDBERG, PhD

Rabbi Grajower passionately argues for infusing Jewish education with alternative assessments. In considering his three factors related to assessment, educators (and students and parents) should ask:

- 1) How do we ensure that the goals/objectives are not idiosyncratic to a particular teacher but rather connected to more universal expectations? This is not to say that a teacher should not infuse his/her creativity and personal interests into a curriculum, as this typically enhances the learning for the students. It is to say that too often we do not provide the scope and sequence, even broadly, for teachers that will allow students to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, and dispositions that will launch them prepared for the future. We also need to consider whether our assessments are too tied to the instructional approach and not objective enough to accurately monitor student development and progress. In particular, it is important to note that Rabbi Grajower focuses on aspects other than skill development
- when he discusses goals/objectives. Of course, assessment of skills is an additional area that must be discussed. See below, regarding benchmark assessments.
- 2) When segmenting a project, how do we ensure that we account for the diversity of student needs? Do all students require and benefit from the same break-down of the project? Do some need more time for certain steps and others less? Would some be more successful with more steps over a shorter period and others with fewer steps overall? What role should each student play in deciding how a task is broken into component steps and advocating for his/her needs? How can educators support both students' planning and the opportunity for metacognitive student learning about their own successful approaches to completing a task.
 - 3) Regarding the last factor, clarifying the final product, Rabbi Gajower urges teachers to utilize rubrics. In the last few decades, rubrics have been a subject of considerable discussion in the educational and psychological literature (Panadero & Jonsson, 2020). Additionally, given the increased usage of technology within education, pre-pandemic and throughout, teachers may find video-based rubrics particularly compelling, as they provide an engaging alternative for teachers and students alike in a sometimes dry treatment of an assignments criteria (Ackermans, Rusman, Nadolski, Sepcht, & Brand-

Gruwel, 2019). Finally, as Makerspaces become more popular, and may well be utilized more post-pandemic, rubrics and assessment in the Maker-space environment warrants consideration (Lin, Yin, Tang, Hadad, & Zhai, 2020).

Rabbi Grajower makes important suggestions in approaching formative assessment. Classroom-based assessment, however, whether traditional or alternative, has both implications and limitations.

I am often asked by school leaders about the current trend referred to as “data-driven decision-making,” which I call, “data-*informed* decision-making.” Note that I do not consider this mere semantics but view that decision-making should not be *driven* by data, often blinded by the numbers. Rather, data should inform decision-making as part of a deliberate discussion about children and their learning. In fact, I urge schools to have class pictures on the table/desk for the class/grade that is the subject of the data discussion to ensure that everyone around the table has the individual children in mind, not just their scores on assessments. There are two major recurring questions that center around how to maximize the benefits of empirical data from assessments:

- 1) What assessments should schools use?
- 2) How can the results best be used to impact the learning?

I believe that answers to both questions begin with the same fundamental understanding of the purpose of various types of assessments.

Most assessments that schools use, whether teacher- or school-made or provided by local/national/international experts/organizations, are achievement/mastery measures. These types of assessments, much like the teacher given quizzes, tests, or other classroom assessments do not reflect maintenance or generalization of the information/abilities. Students can “ace” these types of assessments but not retain the information at a later time, nor be able to perform the overall skill (e.g., reading) over time. Careful consideration of how such assessments are developed and employed is critical. The design of valid, reliable assessments is a complex process and beyond what any one teacher or school can do. Having teacher developed assessments reviewed post-hoc for their psychometric properties is very different than the systematic, prospective analysis that yields sound assessment measures. Equally problematic is the comparison such measures invite. While they supposedly yield universal benchmarks for comparison across schools, finding that students perform better than those at another school may not be relevant if those at the other school are performing sub-par.

In contrast, there is a genre of measurement called dynamic or curriculum-based measurement (Swain & Hagaman, 2020) Indeed, research over the last 35-plus years has supported the efficacy of these short assessments of the “vital signs” (indicators) of student learning

relevant to school outcomes. Curriculum-based measures make no assumptions about instruction or curriculum and incorporate automatic tests of retention and generalization. Examples of this type of measurement are Acadience Reading (and other measures for early childhood, elementary, and high school from Acadience Learning and MaDYK (Mivchan Dinami shel Y'cholot Kriah). These assessments of reading, English and Hebrew, respectively, are like “academic thermometers,” providing quick and repeatable assessments of reading skills that predict whether students are on the right trajectory to lead to literacy success. Early assessment, intervention, and ongoing progress monitoring measures can change outcomes for a child.

Understanding the purpose of different assessments puts educators in a better position to use resulting data productively to inform practice. The test or project score on a typical classroom-based measure yields different information than the score on a curriculum-based measure of literacy or other skill.

There is a strong and vocal movement against testing. This approach needs to shift from a bulldozer, eliminating everything in its path, to a more precise and appropriate focus on the overuse of teacher-made and high-stakes assessments. Not all standardized assessments (and benchmarks) are problematic. We must not lose the opportunity to use dynamic assessments, the short and scientifically supported assessment tools that can help us monitor our students’ progress and inform teaching and learning. Our Jewish day schools have access to these types of tools in both English and Hebrew. Many schools are already using them. School leaders, teachers, and parents are encouraged to understand the purpose of different assessments and use them to advance the learning of students. These “good” types of standardized assessments directly inform ongoing instruction and ensure that which is not working is ceased and teaching that leads to successful learning continues.

“Decision making should not be *driven* by data . . . rather data should inform decision making as part of a deliberate discussion about children and their learning.”

Research, Readings, and Resources

Research

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/1045988X.2019.1678009>

Review of the use and conditions for success for curriculum-based measures.

Readings

Boaler, J. & Confer, A. Assessment for a Growth Mindset / An interested paper discussing the impact of assessment on how students view themselves.

www.youcubed.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/1439422682-AssessmentPaper.pdf

Goldberg, S. J. (2019). MaDYK Assessment of Hebrew Reading: The Importance of Progress Monitoring www.jgateways.org/Blog/MaDYK-Assessment-of-Hebrew-Reading-The-Importance-of-Progress-Monitoring

Himmelsbach, V. (2019). Curriculum based measurement: How to get started. Top Hat Blog, January 11, 2019. An introduction to curriculum-based measurement /

<https://tophat.com/blog/curriculum-based-measurement/>

Resources

<https://studentsatthecenterhub.org/resource/assessment/>

Extensive resources including many on self-assessment

www.common sense.org/education/teaching-strategies/student-centered-formative-assessment

Tips and rubrics to evaluate your assessment strategies

www.interventioncentral.org/curriculum-based-measurement-reading-math-assesment-tests

CBM measures for various subject areas

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The Light of *Tefillah*

MARK HOENIG

Even as I write these words, almost a year into the global pandemic of 2020 and still distanced from the life that we think of as normal, it is very hard to bring to mind the feeling of those early days and weeks. During every waking moment we were plagued with uncertainty. And fear; a constant gnawing fear. Do I need to stay distant from my spouse and family? How long do I need to leave the mail or groceries untouched? Can I leave my house? If I experience symptoms, what will I do? Only questions, no answers. Living in darkness.

The fear was relentless, but not the worst of it. Our sense of stability was shattered. The very foundation of our existence—the stabilizing notion that mankind has pretty much figured out our environment, that by and large we have figured out how to manage or at least anticipate nature—was suddenly yanked out from under us. Each of us was alone, forced to grapple with this new harsh reality by ourselves. In my case, I turned to my relationship with God—and the meaning of my daily communication with God through prayer.

Particularly in the early days and months of the pandemic, focusing on prayer was easy. For two reasons: motivation and opportunity. Suddenly, I was totally vulnerable and powerless, with no other avenue that could provide any answer or comfort. So, I was highly motivated. And in sharp contrast to the

kind of prayer we have all experienced over the course of our “normal” lives, there were zero distractions. There was no traffic to beat or place to go; there was no pressing work to be done or people to see. The entire world was caught up in a pandemic, stopped in mid-step by uncertainty and fear, and I was involved in *tefillah*, period. Total focus.

For me, the first challenge was to understand every word. With only time on my hands, I studied each word, and then each sentence and each paragraph. Slowly, methodically, learning the *tefillah*, understanding its meanings and carefully thinking through all its possible messages. Why was this word used here, what might it be saying if we consider its various meanings and its shades of meaning? What does this sentence truly convey? And how about the totality of this paragraph: Where is it from, what is the context, what did its author mean, and why is it placed here within the prayer service? What about the overall ordering and structure of the different portions of the *tefillah*; why does one precede and another follow? I looked for hidden or subtle meanings and signals, or even just the more obvious meanings overlooked by me for all my life. What I found was that *tefillah* is a gift. A light in the darkness.

King David, whose psalms comprise a significant part of our liturgy, along with the other prophets and sages whose words and messages from antiquity are the framework of our *tefillah*, became my teachers. And the experience has been eye-opening. We often think of *tefillah* in its most rudimentary sense: We first praise God, then make requests

for the things we need, then express gratitude. Flatter, beg and thank. But there is a very different way to understand and experience *tefillah*. If you pause and analyze the spectrum of ideas introduced, if you open yourself up to and explore the underlying messages, you can develop a better understanding of God's world and our place within it. You can derive lessons about why we are here, what our mission is, and how we should pursue it. Particularly during a time when our global society is pulsating with uncertainty and fear, seemingly engulfed in darkness, this deeper understanding of God's eternal world provides an incredibly welcome platform from which to experience and process our physical world.

The introductory parts of the morning *tefillah* offer just one example. We recite a sequence of blessings and individualized prayers, followed by a recitation of Psalm 30, which introduces the more formal part of our morning prayers. On their surface, these introductory portions of our morning ritual appear to be largely praise and gratitude to God, and an expression of our hope that we continue to merit God's blessings. But beneath the surface, the introductory sequence packs a far more powerful message. We are reminded that there is nothing—*nothing*—that does not come from God, and there is no solution that will come from anywhere but God. Indeed, as King David observed in Psalm 30, at the times in our lives when things appear to be running smoothly, in our serenity we imagine that we ourselves control our destiny; but the truth is, King David reminded us, that any success or failure

we experience is the work of God, and only God.

These are lessons that often go unnoticed when we race through our morning routine. God is in charge, not man. Our human tendency is to forget this truth, but every morning we read passages that should remind us: When things go well our brains trick us into believing that mankind has the world figured out. But don't be fooled; God is running the show, always was and always will be. So, we shouldn't delude ourselves with unfounded complacency about our reality; we should never lose sight that God is the center of our world. Wow, bingo. In the throes of a global pandemic that has shattered our sense of complacency and any notion that we control our fate, these simple observations, made millennia ago, resonate completely.

The *tefillah* is extraordinarily rich, offering so many lessons that can help us to navigate the world. If only we would spend the time to steep ourselves in its lessons. *Ashrei*, we say three times a day, fortunate and joyous is the man who pursues his relationship with God. Joyous? Why, in what way? We find a similar concept later in the *tefillah*. After reciting the Shema—after proclaiming the oneness of God and God's continuing involvement in the world—we say something quite odd. We say that these truths are beloved, cherished, delightful and pleasant. What? The fact that God is our God, that God created the world and continues to run it, is *pleasant*? How so?

These truths are pleasant, they bring true joy, because they allow us to better understand and internalize a reality not

defined and distorted by a focus limited to the physical world. These truths are pleasant because they allow us to appreciate a reality beyond what we are able to sense, beyond a reality stuck inside just four dimensions. When we allow ourselves to be reminded that we are part of God's eternal world, that our physical world is not all there is, then we begin to experience our physical world—ups, downs and everything in between—with a better perspective. And that perspective, that freedom from the distortions of a world understood only as physical, is pleasant. It leads to joy, true and enduring joy.

These ideas are not novel or unknown to us. Torah Judaism rests squarely on these truths, that there is a God, one God, and that God created and runs the world. But we fail to carry these ideas with us every day. That failure, which is built into the way our brains work, hurts us, disables our ability to properly interpret the world and fashion our lives as we should. That failure allows us to imagine that our science will protect us from nature's surprises and leaves us empty and lost when reality proves otherwise.

Tefillah is designed to be, and can be, the way to avoid that failure. Not if we treat it as merely an obligation; not by racing through a script in order to check a box and continue with our day. Rather, we should treat *tefillah* as a gift, an opportunity to steep in its lessons and to remind ourselves about real truths. Daily immersion in these truths would help us to remain mindful of our place within God's eternal world and position us to better navigate our physical

environment. No, we would not have all the answers; but we would avoid living inside a distorted reality that can lead to darkness.

Tefillah can bring light. We need to let it in.

Following “The Light of *Tefillah*”

MOSHE SOKOLOW, PhD

Mark Hoenig has provided a felicitous definition of spirituality in describing *tefillah* as an opportunity to “develop a better understanding of God’s world and our place within it... why we are here, what our mission is, and how we should pursue it.” His characterization of *tefillah* during the Corona pandemic as “a gift, a light in the darkness” begs the question: Is it only against such a background that *tefillah* stands out as a source of illumination, or can such insight be sustained even in “ordinary” times?

My answer is affirmative, and it is that proposition that I would like to address by stipulating a philosophical-ideological platform, along with its translation into curriculum and instruction. My comments are addressed to all “pray-ers”: educators, students, and parents alike.

The Philosophy of Prayer

I shall make three stipulations about *tefillah*:

1. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (The Rav) correctly defined *tefillah* as a dialogue between man and God.
2. He correctly identified man's part in that dialogue as preparing and presenting his "needs assessment."
3. The better we understand the texts of our prayers and what they are supposed to achieve, the more accurate our assessment, and, hence, the more effective and rewarding our dialogue.

A Curriculum for Prayer

An effective curriculum articulates its aims and objectives, designates its instructional means and learning experiences, and provides an instrument to assess its progress and success.

Aims and Objectives:

- To appreciate *דע לפני מי אתה עומד* ("know before Whom you stand") in all its individual ramifications, including proper dress, comportment, attitude, and disposition, and its communal ramifications, such as proper venue and quorum.
- To equip us with the linguistic and literary tools necessary to comprehend those prayers that form the nucleus of traditional Jewish liturgy, such as (but not limited to) *P'sukei d'Zimra*, *K'ri'at Sh'ma* u-*virkhoteha*, and the *Amidah*.

Instruction and Experience:

The individual and communal aspects of *tefillah* constitute distinct educational experiences and invite separate pedagogical and didactic treatments. While nearly all the traditional liturgy is formulated in the grammatical plural (the exceptions being, largely, several *ברכות השחר*), we may distinguish between those parts that are collective, e.g., *פסוקי דזמרה* (i.e., mostly those biblical in origin) and those that are more individual, like *שמע* and the *עמידה*.

The illustration I shall provide comes from the *עמידה*, the quintessential petitionary prayer (*תחינה*). Other individual and personal segments, such as *קריאת שמע וברכותיה* would also benefit from greater individuated sophistication and refinement, but must be left for another opportunity. Comprehension and evaluation of the collective texts can be achieved through their study in their original contexts—e.g., *תהלים* as part of *תנ"ך*.

Tefillah: More than "Flatter, Beg, and Thank"

Pursuant to our stipulations about the dialogic nature of prayer, in general, and the distinctiveness of individual-personal-petitionary prayer, in particular, we need to address the following question: If God is a *שומע תפילה* and listens for my prayer, for what am I listening in return? Since cognitive psychology considers that intellectual and moral development improve through the resolution of disequilibrium ("cognitive dissonance"), we offer the following example as an object lesson.

1. In Genesis 1:12, the Torah states: “The earth brought forth vegetation...,” indicating that grass had begun to grow on day three of creation.
2. In Genesis 2:5, however, we read: “No shrub of the field (*si’ah ha-sadeh*) had yet appeared in the earth, neither had any herb of the field begun to grow, because the Lord God had not caused rain to fall on the earth and there was no human to cultivate it.” This states to the contrary, that there was no vegetation prior to the creation of man on day six.
3. Rav Assi resolved the contradiction as follows: This indicates that the vegetation was held at the earth’s surface [from day 3] until Adam came and prayed for it [on day 6]; then the rains came, and it grew. This teaches us that God craves the prayers of the righteous. (BT *Hullin* 60b)

Were it not for Rav Assi, we might not dare to suggest it, but without our prayers (a homily on *si’ah*) and our actions (cultivating the earth), God’s design for the universe is incomplete. What we should listen for when we address God is nothing more—or other—than what we bring to the dialogue: our thoughts and deeds. We “speak” to God in order to motivate ourselves.

A Resource: The Amidah as a Personal Tefillah Assessment: A Recurring Check for Understanding

Among educators, it is common to speak about two types of assessment. The first, the more prevalent of the two, is the “summative” assessment that is conducted on the completion of a unit of learning or at the conclusion of a specified term of study. The second, known as “formative” assessment, is conducted on an ongoing basis. It informs the teacher of students’ progress and allows for constant revision of both the objectives and instructional means. One such formative assessment is the “check for understanding,” the idea that teachers must pause, periodically, to ascertain the extent to which their students have grasped, and internalized, the subject matter, skills, and dispositions they want to inculcate in them.

I submit that the study of the Amidah provides a recurring opportunity to check our students’ (and our own) progress in understanding our *tefillot*, applying the requisite skills of physical comportment and halakhic regulation, and, above all, the acquisition and exercise of the character strengths and dispositions associated with them. Here is an illustration of the latter.

“ We should treat tefillah as a gift, an opportunity to steep in its lessons and to remind ourselves about real truths.”

WHAT WE SAY	THE CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING
אתה חונן לאדם דעת	Am I a lifelong learner? Do I set aside times for Torah study?
ראה-נא בעניינינו... וגאלנו גאולה שלמה	Do I keep up with Jewish current events? If Jews are suffering, am I aware and empathetic? What am I doing to assist them?

רפאנו ה' ונרפא	Am I taking care of myself? Do I eat right and exercise? Am I following CDC guidelines?
ברכת השנים	Am I doing all I can to fight global warming and climate change?
השיבה שופטנו כבראשונה	Am I overly judgmental or critical? Do I fulfill את דן את כלל האדם לכף זכות?
על הצדיקים	Do I have proper regard for halakhic and communal Jewish authorities? Am I a unifier of Jews or a separator?
שמע קולנו	Am I as patient and long-suffering with others' complaints and requests as I expect God to be with mine?
מודים אנחנו לך	Do I express my gratitude adequately—to parents, teachers, neighbors, co-workers, classmates...?
שים שלום	Do I seek negotiation and compromise? Am I prepared to sacrifice to resolve disputes, or is it always "my way or the highway"?

Since להתפלל is the reflexive of the verb ל-ל, to judge, it means self-judgment or introspection. Our prayers will hopefully influence God to do His part, but He is also depending on us to do ours.

Research, Readings and Resources

Research

Mountain, V. (2005). Prayer is a positive activity for children—a report on recent research. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 10:3, 291-305, DOI: 10.1080/13644360500347573
A review of children's interview responses revealing their view of prayer as an important tool to help in life.

Sigel, D. (2016). Prayer and adolescence: Can formal instruction make a difference? *Religious Education*, 111:2, 200-221, DOI: 10.1080/00344087.2016.1111042
Through questionnaires and interviews, Sigel explores the impact of brief formal instruction in prayer. Students were more appreciative of prayer and experienced a more connected discourse to God following the intervention.

Readings

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Resources

www.lookstein.org/professional-dev/educational-resources-jewish-prayertefilla/
www.jewishteacher.org/teacher-resources/tfilah/

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Moshe Sokolow, Ph.D. is the Associate Dean of the Azrieli Graduate School and Director of the Fanya Gottesfeld Heller Doctoral Program in Jewish Educational Leadership and Innovation. His most recent book is *Reading the Rav: Exploring Religious Themes in the Writings of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (NY: Kodesh Press, 2018).

Sustaining Change for Judaic Studies Teachers: Two Vehicles of Support

RABBI YEHUDA CHANALES

How can a crisis lead to lasting change? When discussing the *nisayanot*, or challenges that Avraham was tested with, Ramban explains that these challenges helped externalize and uncover certain latent potentialities in Avraham and bring them to fruition—or, as he puts it, “*Ihotzi min hakoach el hapoel*”. Despite the obvious discomfort they engender, challenging situations enable us to discover new opportunities for growth and uncover untapped resources. This year has presented us all with significant challenges that although often unwelcome have nonetheless given us many opportunities to learn about ourselves in a more profound manner.

I would like to focus on two ways in which Covid uncovered fundamental challenges preventing adaptive change in the way Judaic studies teachers “do” and how they “are” in their day to day experience in our schools. Confronting these challenges in systematic ways can help us develop a more reflective approach to the roles of teachers and their students’ ever-changing needs as we seek to continue to maintain the Torah’s relevance and significance in students’ lives.

Covid and Teacher Doing: Supporting Through Greater Collaboration

The March 2020 abrupt shift to remote learning challenged many Judaic studies teachers to reconsider the tools and approaches they use. With physical distance, students easily distracted, and the challenge of students spending extended periods of time in front of computers, teachers needed to evaluate the tools, structures and pedagogy they used to engage students. For some, the constraints of the new modality prompted deep exploration and the consideration of compelling questions. How can we design learning activities that students can work on without us? How much should we control the process of learning? When do students need my guidance and support and when are they better off working on their own? With easy access to translated texts, how can we encourage students to build their textual skills? How do I know that a student’s written work is truly their own? What is THE most important thing I want my students to walk away with from a year of learning when our time together has been limited?

While research has yet to be conducted, the plethora of professional development opportunities offered during this monumental pivot suggests that some teachers were inspired to learn new approaches and experiment with them online and in their socially distanced classrooms. Others, overwhelmed by the questions and daunting task of adapting to a new medium while concurrently, perhaps, operating a full time day care-school-restaurant for

their children, relied on teaching styles already comfortable for them. Even these seemingly unchanged teachers, however, were likely more open to recognizing the challenges and to consider new ideas.

This offers us an important opportunity, if we can capitalize on the growing number of teachers in the field willing to ask bigger and more foundational questions and develop more agile approaches to teaching Torah to their students. What might we accomplish if we could leverage this deep reflection and use it to spark ongoing growth and adaptation? If we are to be successful we will have to think carefully about the barriers to promoting and adopting widespread, lasting change that encourages schools and teachers to return to old, standard, and somewhat ineffective methods.

Recognizing the need to think differently is far from having the ability to implement a different approach in the classroom. Many teachers learned *gemara* or *tanach* in a particular way and have not been exposed to different ways to approach those texts. Quality curricular materials and models of excellent pedagogy are difficult to find, leaving teachers with the daily grind of substantial preparation, leaving minimal time for refined thinking or to carefully design and align plans. Teachers have limited collaborative opportunities, with materials shared, at best, within their school, but often operating in completely isolated silos.

If we want to take advantage of the openness to change that Covid fostered, we must develop new structures and systems for the field of Judaic studies

teachers to build, share and refine curricular materials and learning strategies together. Developing cohorts of school-based professionals, working with the urgency of implementing something in their own context but pushed by peers from other schools to collaborate and refine their thinking has been one of the most successful ways to promote field wide change. Cohorts convened by the Jewish Theological Seminary and Legacy Heritage have seen much success but have yet to tackle the unique needs of Judaic teachers in Orthodox schools. Working with cohorts of teachers across different schools we could:

- Provide opportunities for teachers to learn Torah texts in ways that may be different than how they learned in school, yeshiva or seminary
- Create vehicles for sharing resources and exposing teachers to models of excellence and best practice in other settings
- Develop a mechanism for cohorts of teachers to develop new curricular materials and learn from each other's application of those materials in their individual classrooms

With strategic planning, a more systematic approach, and collaboratively developing solutions that address the big questions Covid has prompted, we can widen teachers' toolboxes and help ensure that Torah learning is inspired by our pandemic lessons, and inspires the minds and hearts of our students.

Covid and Teacher Being: Supporting Teachers' Inner World

We have considered how Covid exposed questions about the pedagogy teachers use and the importance of supporting sustained collaborative work to take advantage of openness to change. The pandemic, however, also uncovered the significant role teachers' presence and energy play—especially in Judaic classrooms. The loss that teachers experienced during the pandemic went beyond their ability to engage students in meaningful day-to-day learning. Isolated and physically distant from students, teachers lost the sense of connection that fueled them. While remote learning, in positive ways, pushed teachers to think more carefully about the structure of their lesson and tools they could use, it also removed the joy of live, spontaneous interactions in classrooms and hallways.

Teachers were faced with the effortful work of teaching without the benefit of seeing their students' faces express joy, understanding or frustration. This caused noticeable dips in many teachers' passion, sense of mission and connection. It made clear that the all-encompassing nature of a teacher's role in the classroom demands a certain level of energy, emotional well-being and self-awareness to complement well-designed lesson plans. The crisis of Covid highlighted the importance of this key component of teaching that may not have always been explicitly or sufficiently recognized, nurtured or supported.

And while the acute crisis of Covid presented unique challenges to teachers'

sense of self and energy in the classroom, it is not hard to imagine the various events or challenges that impact teachers even in a typical year. As Parker Palmer explains: "We (teachers) lose heart, in part, because teaching is a daily exercise in vulnerability. I need not reveal personal secrets to feel naked in front of a class. I need only parse a sentence or work a proof on the board while my students doze off or pass notes. No matter how technical or abstract my subject may be, the things I teach are things I care about—and what I care about helps define my selfhood" (Palmer, *Courage to Teach*, 17). This sense of vulnerability is only heightened for Judaic studies teachers who judge themselves, and are judged by others, by their students' affective, lived connection to Torah values now and in the future.

Recognizing how important the inner work, energy and emotional support of teachers is to their success and that of their students, how can we make it a more commonplace, integral part of our schools?

At the Fuchs Mizrahi School we have been blessed to partner with Yeshivat Makor Chayim in Israel for the past two years. Under the guidance of Rav Dov and Yishai Singer and with the support of the Jewish Education Innovation Challenge, we developed ways to support teachers' sense of connection, energy and self-awareness at school. Besides regular curricular focused meetings, Upper School Judaic teachers meet bi-weekly to reflect and learn from each other's experiences, struggles and successes. The meetings, or "*chaburot*,"

have deepened the groups' mutual trust and respect for each other, developed a common language and fostered a culture where we can challenge and support each other as we deal with the joys and challenges of working with adolescents. Energized by the group and their own sense of personal growth, we are empowered to nurture a similar type of growth in our students.

While finding time for any meetings was challenging during remote learning last year, faculty embraced the opportunity to continue our regular meetings (albeit a little less frequently). Continuing the faculty *chaburot* during Covid provided teachers opportunities to reflect together on their pandemic experience, think more carefully about the sources of their successes and frustration and regain the sense of community that energizes them. This, in turn, helped bring that heightened awareness and energy to their daily classes with students. The Covid crisis revealed the strong bonds that were already developing amongst our group and uncovered the impact we had sensed it was having on how we interacted with each other and our students.

Some suggestions for how other schools and the field as a whole can leverage our pandemic lessons and develop systems and structures that support teacher culture, emotional well-being and personal growth include:

- Develop new ways to continue to learn from the work of chassidut inspired institutions like Mekor Chayim in Israel and parallel work in Harvard developed professional learning modules such as “Developing Myself” and “Articulating the Intangibles of Teaching”
- Dedicate sacrosanct time and space within the school schedule for teachers to together reflect more deeply on their experience at school

Change is hard and sustaining adaptive change in education is even harder. The “test” of the Covid pandemic uncovered important needs for the field of Jewish education and provided a unique opportunity for reflection and openness to new ideas. Thinking about strengthening the systems and cultures in our schools to support our most sacred, and growingly scarce, resource—our teachers—will be critical to making sure we succeed in inspiring and educating our students in our ever-changing world.

- Incorporate strategies for reflection, self-awareness and trust-building communication into teacher preparation programs

A Wise Investment in Educators' Social-Emotional Growth

RABBI MORDECHAI SCHIFFMAN, PsyD

In a persuasive argument, Rabbi Chanales has charged the field of Jewish education to respond to the challenges triggered by Covid by investing in teachers through the creation of a more collaborative system for curriculum development and implementation, as well as the establishment of supportive environments for teachers' social and emotional growth. These improvements, while challenging to design and implement in the short term, will no doubt pay long term dividends. While I hope that the field takes ownership of both of these suggestions, I will focus my thoughts on the second of the two, as it is a topic we have been actively working on at Azrieli with Master's degree students in our Seminar in Jewish Education.

Much focus has been given to the infusion of social and emotional learning (SEL) within classrooms and school cultures. Initially, many schools were reluctant to add soft skills to an already crowded curriculum and busy schedule, but the research indicates that SEL programs not only improve a student's social success and emotional health but can enhance academic effectiveness, as well (Jones, Bouffard, & Weisboard, 2013). The five key components of SEL (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and

decision making) need not be taught in a stand-alone curriculum, rather they can be embedded within regular content classes. In fact, SEL approaches work best when they are not limited to a particular domain, but rather impact the broad school culture by weaving the language and ethos of SEL throughout all school activities (Oberle et al., 2016).

In many schools where SEL is adopted for students, there is often limited focus on how the teachers can develop their own SEL competencies. An essential, yet often overlooked component of SEL is the focus on the teacher's own social and emotional growth. Teachers who lack self-awareness of their own personality traits and emotional reactions, will not only be unable to help their students achieve social and emotional goals but will likely have low job satisfaction and increased burn out. In contrast, a teacher who embodies and models SEL skills will not only be better at teaching those SEL skills but will likely have more impactful relationships with their students and colleagues and be a more effective teacher for all content areas (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

While individuals naturally acquire strong SEL skills, it is clear from research with children that many students do not develop them without being explicitly taught, and then provided space and time for practice and application of those skills. It would seem logical to assume that the same investment of time and energy would be necessary to develop SEL skills for teachers.

The process Rabbi Chanales describes, building on Rabbi Dov Singer's work, not only addresses the need to attend to

teachers' SEL skills, but offers an addition to the standard way we consider developing teachers SEL skills. Beyond professional development approaches that aim to increase teacher knowledge in the area, often focusing on how teachers can help students, Rabbi Chanale recognizes the critical need to incorporate teachers' own growth into the discussion. In doing so, he creates a school culture that emphasizes growth for all.

A strength of Rabbi Dov Singer's approach is that it embeds SEL within the language and teachings of Chassidut. This sanctifies the SEL process for a Jewish day school and adds an element of spiritual intelligence that is absent from standard SEL curricula (see Singer, 2020 for more details). Yet, it is important to note for those who are not familiar with Chassidut or are not confident that such language would work in their schools, there are other options that can be used to boost a teachers' own SEL growth, such as the courses at

Harvard that Rabbi Chanale mentions, as well as helpful books such as Aguilar (2018). Additionally, there is potential to use a mussar-based SEL framework (Kress, 2017), or even one based on classic works, such as Pirkei Avot (an approach and curriculum I am currently developing).

Covid has increased awareness of the mental health challenges that already existed, and no doubt added to the already troubling mental health statistics. With a strategic approach to SEL, schools can become places of health and growth, promoting the skills that will contribute to resilience. In addition to improving the mental health and supporting the social emotional growth of students through SEL programs, it is essential that we expand our focus to include teachers' mental health and provide opportunities for their psychological flourishing as well. Rabbi Chanale is pushing the field in the right direction.

“With a strategic approach to SEL, schools become places of health and growth, promoting the skills that will contribute to resilience.”

Research, Readings, and Resources

Research

Jennings, P.A. & Greenberg, M.T. (2009). The prosocial classroom: Teacher social and emotional competence in relation to student and classroom outcomes. *Review of Educational Research* 79, 491-525.

Jones, S. M., Bouffard, S. M., & Weissboard, R. (2013). Educators' social and emotional skills vital to learning. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 94, 62-65.

A thorough discussion of the relationship of teacher SEL to student outcomes with general and specific suggestion.

Kress, J. S. (2017). Learning from a mussar-based initiative in a community day school. *Journal of Jewish Education*, 83(2), 133-150

An article outlining the Chanoch La'Naar program at Gann Academy, which used a mussar based approach to teach SEL skills in students and teachers.

Oberle, E., Domitrovich, C. E., Meyers, D. C. , Duncan, C., & Weissberg, R. P. (2016). Establishing systemic social and emotional learning approaches in schools: A framework for schoolwide implementation. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 46 (3), 277-297.

Patti, J. (2006). Addressing social-emotional education in teacher education. *The educator's guide to emotional intelligence and academic achievement: Social-emotional learning in the classroom*, 67-75.

An overview as to why it is important for teachers to be trained themselves in reflective SEL techniques so that they can best model those skills for students, with suggestions for implementation within training programs.

Readings

Aguilar, E. (2018). *Onward: Cultivating emotional resilience in educators*. John Wiley & Sons

A practical book for teachers to work on building their own emotional resilience. Each month has a different SEL goal for the teacher to work on, such as self-awareness, understanding emotions, and mindfulness.

Future of Children, (Spring, 2017) Special Issue

Entire journal dedicated to SEL including basic articles, review of interventions, and consideration of SEL and teachers

https://futureofchildren.princeton.edu/sites/futureofchildren/files/media/foc_spring_vol27_no1_for_web_0_0.pdf

Singer, D. (2020). "Service of God" as a Unique Discipline. *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 52(4).

Rabbi Singer's vision for a spiritually-infused program that helps people connect to self, others, and then God, culminating with the ultimate step of cleaving to God. See also the Hebrew website for his program, www.lifnim.co.il/.

Resources

CASEL

<https://casel.org/teacher-resources/>

Website from the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning which offers many resources for classroom teachers

Dr. Kimberly Schonert-Reichl (2012). Recent research on science behind SEL learning.

Video available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=FOL-Rn0QtEw

Edutopia (2017). Social and emotional learning.

<https://edutopia.org/social-emotional-learning>

About the Authors

Rabbi Yehuda Chanales is a graduate of the Azrieli Master's in Jewish Education (2007) and currently serves as the Director of Educational Advancement at the Fuchs Mizrahi School in Cleveland, Ohio.

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman is a graduate of the Azrieli Master's in Jewish education (2012) and is currently an Assistant Professor at Azrieli.

In addition to his Azrieli position, Rabbi Dr. Schiffman serves as assistant rabbi at Kingsway Jewish Center and oversees youth and family learning activities. A clinical psychologist, he hosts the *Psyched for Torah* series and is currently working on a curriculum that explores social and emotional learning and positive psychology in the context of *Pirkei Avot*.

“ We begin every day with the same *Beracha—Baruch Ata Hashem, HaMelamed Torah L'Amo Yisroel*. Blessed are you Hashem, who teaches Torah to His Nation, Israel.

Hashem has no requirements and conditions upon which He will teach Torah. Any time, any place—Jewish education must continue.”

Educational Truths, Always

RABBI YEHUDA DEUTSCH

This past November, in response to a request from Azrieli to hear about teacher's Covid-19 experiences, I shared the following reflection:

I am grateful for what I do have. Yet, the stark reality of how much my teaching life has changed, is overwhelming.

I miss sleepy faces that stumble into class each morning.

I miss seeing them gorge on nosh bags when they've been awake for nary an hour.

I miss watching them say Brachos & answer amen to each other.

I miss seeing that "aha moment" when they figure something out on their own after being prodded and coaxed in the right direction.

I miss guiding them as they try to navigate their disputes with each other after recess & learn real life skills of conflict and resolution.

I miss watching them play with each other as my collection of boardgames in my classroom gather dust.

I miss the sound of the pencil sharpener grating on my ears because I allow them to sharpen their pencils in class (even though I told him next time I won't.)

I miss seeing ketchup stains on the white shirts of rosh chodesh.

I miss watching them sweep up each other's mess on the classroom floor to prepare for English.

I miss their fingers on the place and the sweet sounds of their voices mingling together as they learn Torah, giving endless nachas to the One who wrote it.

I miss reading their faces when something is afoot because it is always written on an 8-year old's face.

On the bright side, I'm so privileged to maintain my relationship with them. I am buoyed by the incredible support, appreciation and confidence that the parents have shown.

And above all else, in my own small little way, to be able to perpetuate the learning of Torah which will sustain us through these trying times.

As I continue to reflect on our current reality, and the tension between gratitude and loss, there are several thoughts I believe will serve me well now and in the future.

Teach, Always

Teaching during Covid feels like triage. It is a reactive endeavor with unproven methods and high stakes. Children, who crave stability, find that nothing is certain. And yet, we begin every day with the same *Beracha*—*Baruch Ata Hashem, HaMelamed Torah L'Amo Yisroel*. Blessed are you Hashem, who teaches Torah to His Nation, Israel. Hashem has no requirements and conditions upon which He will teach Torah. Any time, any place—Jewish education must continue. My message from teaching

throughout the pandemic is that every Jewish educator must possess extreme flexibility in order to teach *Hashem's* children, to make it happen, under any circumstance.

Connect, Always

In a time where everybody's world was shattered and shrunk to the confines of their own homes, the personal touch from Rebbi to Talmid was invaluable. Children relished a visit from a Rebbi or teacher. A socially distant drive-by was cherished by students and parents alike. Whereas during non-trauma, a teacher or Rebbi calling upon a child at his home may be perceived as intrusive or socially inappropriate, striving for an impactful way to connect is no less important. Whether in crisis, or in a typical classroom, connecting to my students in a personal way is well worth the investment.

Energize, Always

A lesson I learned when making my first children's album has stayed with me for more than 20 years and proved pivotal in shaping my approach to teaching remotely. In preparation for the recording, I had the privilege of asking a legend in the field, the great Abie Rotenberg for practical pointers on how to make a recording session effective. He said, "remember, as exciting as things may seem to you in the recording studio, they get watered down when a person is listening to it on a recording. Overdramatize as much as you dare so it is engaging for to the listener." So, when Covid-19

turned every teaching technique on its head, lessons that I could teach in my sleep suddenly needed a new way to be brought to life. A colleague told me that teaching is invigorating, teaching on Zoom is exhausting. But whether in classrooms, or viewed on an 8-inch screen, I need to be engaged and engaging.

Socialize, Always

The ability for students to have meaningful and healthy social interactions was severely limited, as was my role in my students' social learning. Without the playground, collaborative classroom learning and other informal social opportunities, it became challenging to serve as a social coach, or teach social skills. Missing my role as social educator only served to convince me of what a central part of Jewish education *bein adam l'chavero* should be.

Grateful, Always

Perhaps the most powerful Covid lesson I have learned, and I hope many others have learned as well, is how imperative schools are. They are so much more than places of learning. Nothing can compare with the social, emotional, spiritual and academic growth they afford our students. But it is now so clear to me how much schools mean to educators. As my November musings revealed, I miss so much of the school experience. I hope we are soon safely back to learning together in our classrooms. And I hope I, I never take for granted what an awesome blessing it is to be a Jewish educator.

The Purpose of Schools and Teachers

LAYA SALOMON, EdD

We all agree that one of the fortuitous outcomes of this year's unfortunate challenges has been the opportunity to look at schools and teachers in a new light. For one, we've come to value schools as physical havens for children that afford their parents some well-deserved time and space. More importantly, we've developed newfound appreciation towards teachers for all they do to support and ensure children's academic growth. Though perhaps most striking and intriguing, the pandemic has afforded the opportunity to reconsider two deeply philosophical questions that have long pervaded educational thought: *What is the purpose of school? What is the role of the teacher?* (Dewey, 1938; Locke, 1693). Rabbi Yehuda Deutsch's essay exposes the profundity and relevance of these questions.

It has become clear that school is so much more than a housing ground for improving students' IQ levels. School is a place for nurturing and cultivating the whole being. Through the schooling experience, children learn how to argue, how to make amends and how to choose friends wisely. On the playground, in the classroom and in the principal's office, they learn that life isn't always fair. Students learn to take cues from their peers, teachers and role models and they become resolute about who they are and who they want to be. They recognize

that they are part of a unified system that is much bigger than themselves and that there are responsibilities and expectations that come with that. While we have always understood schools to be places of learning, we can now adopt a more expansive definition for "learning" that includes much more than a grade level curriculum. Through school, students learn—they learn about themselves, about others, about their futures, and about life.

The stress and changes in the prior months have also prompted a deeper understanding of teaching and teachers. If the role of the teacher is simply to impart content, we can program robots to deliver that from afar. Rather, teaching effectively necessitates a dedication and ability to tend to delicate, nuanced individual and group needs, and we've recognized that only a human being can do this successfully. Teachers are also tasked with cultivating relationships, serving as role models, and are responsible for the spiritual and emotional growth of their students. In fact, it is these responsibilities that motivate most Jewish educators to enter the field to begin with; without these opportunities, they feel bereft of their mission (Salomon, 2011). Teachers are molders of minds, hearts and souls. They are called upon to model *simchat hachayim*, to allay fears, to offer compliments, and to point out wrongdoings. Teaching the whole child is what characterizes the effective teacher, and the impact this has on a student's motivation, self-esteem and future aspirations cannot be understated (Darling-Hammond, 2015; Tucker & Stronge, 2005).

What is the purpose of school and what is the role of the teacher? Today's more complex philosophical understanding of teachers and schools differs from the traditional view of the educative process many once held. We can use this deeper insight to propel us into the future by investing our all in the education of our children. As leaders, parents, and community members, we should do our utmost to professionalize the field

of education, to hire only those who are deserving, and to encourage the most skilled and talented to enter this noble profession. By valuing our teachers and supporting educational institutions with our fullest of hearts and resources, we are recognizing schools for what they really are and what they can be.

Research, Readings and Resources

Research

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Salomon, L. (2011). The decision to teach: Why Orthodox Jewish teachers chose the profession. In Sokolow, M. & Schnall, D. *The Azrieli Papers*, Volume II, 19-37. Yeshiva University Press. Research exploring the factors that drive entry into the Jewish education profession.

Readings

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Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York: Macmillan Company.

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Locke, J. (1693). *Some thoughts concerning ducation*. <https://download.tuxfamily.org/openmathdep/teaching/Education-Locke.pdf>

Tucker, P.D. & Stronge, J.H. (2005). *Linking teacher evaluation and student learning*. ASCD.

Resources

www.youtube.com/watch?v=vrU6YJle6Q4

Video of Azul Terronez discussing what makes a good teacher great.

<https://rabbisacks.org/rabbi-sacks-speaks-house-lords-debate-education/>

Powerful and inspiring presentation by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks to the British Parliament, December, 2017.

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“To every Jewish educator who zoomed to their students, who masked or behind partitions imparted words of Torah, who spent hours redesigning teaching and learning to meet everchanging needs, even as they struggled to meet their own needs and those of their families, we offer our admiration and our sincere thank you.”

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aspiring and established Jewish educators master the sacred task of teaching their students the wisdom of our Jewish texts and traditions. Established in 1983 in recognition of a major gift by the Montreal architect-builder and communal leader David J. Azrieli, the school's mission goes beyond preparing Jewish educational leaders to serve and innovate and training Torah educators to relay the rich history, teachings and traditions of our Jewish heritage. We aspire to do so with proven teaching tactics, intelligence and joy.

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