The Future for Jewish Day Schools

Our Jewish day schools are at a crossroads. On the one hand, we know that a day school education is one of the most effective forms of Jewish education: our alumni largely graduate with both deep Jewish knowledge and strong positive engagement that results in an active and engaged Jewish adult life.

On the other hand, day schools are struggling to be sustainable. Tuition feels unaffordable to an increasing amount of potential families, and perhaps equally as important, the value isn’t clear to most Jewish families today. Put another way, more and more Jews, despite wanting their children to be Jewishly knowledgeable and engaged,
just do not feel day school speaks to them or is right for their family.

For this issue of Gleanings, we asked the top thinkers, leaders, and doers in the Jewish day school sector today to respond to three basic questions:

1. **What does Jewish day school education look like today and what could it look like in the future?**
2. **Why is this important for our collective Jewish future?**
3. **What should day school leaders do to help us achieve the results we want?**

What follows are their insightful responses that include how the value of day schools can be re-imagined to appeal to new and more families. The authors’ frank and direct arguments ask us to think more critically and optimistically about the power of effective leadership and how we can amplify what we already do well. They challenge us to get out of our comfort zones and more honestly and completely live our Jewish values. Our authors include Jane Taubenfeld Cohen and Yossi Prager, who offer a view of the field from a national perspective, to many day school leaders in the thick of this work: Dr. Michael Kay, Nora Anderson, Dr. Bruce Powell, Benjamin Mann, Dr. Susie Tanchel, Rabbi Mitch Malkus, and Jerry D. Isaak-Shapiro. Dr. Ray Levi, the director of our Day School Leadership Training Institute (DSLTI) offers concluding thoughts, urging us to embrace and act on the critical conversations we need to have going forward.

We look forward to having you join the conversation on our Facebook page (@TheDavidsonSchoolJTS) or by emailing us at gleanings@jtsa.edu. We would like to hear your perspective as we further this important dialogue.

Shalom,

Mark S. Young, Managing Director, the Leadership Commons

**CONTENTS**

Beyond Chemistry: Conditions for Successful Leadership .................................................. 3
JANE TAUBENFELD COHEN

Beyond Academic Excellence: Establishing Competitive Advantage in a Challenging Market .... 6
DR. MICHAEL A. KAY

Is Personalized Learning a Path to Reversing Enrollment Trends? ................................. 8
YOSSI PRAGER

Educating for Curiosity, Empathy, and Imagination ......................................................... 12
NORA ANDERSON

Day Schools Provide the Best Preparation for Civic Engagement ..................................... 14
DR. BRUCE POWELL

Jewish Studies in Day School: A View into the Present and Future ................................ 17
MITCHEL MALKUS

Committing Ourselves to This Sacred Work ................................................................. 19
DR. SUSIE TANCHEL

Leaning Toward Inclusive, Racially Aware Jewish Day Schools .................................... 21
BENJAMIN MANN

Leading with Our Heart ......................................................................................... 24
JERRY D. ISAAK-SHAPIRO

Sustaining Our Day Schools: Will We Heed the Call? ...................................................... 25
DR. RAY LEVI
Beyond Chemistry: Conditions for Successful Leadership

JANE TAUBENFELD COHEN

The head of school had held his position for two years. The school had added a third kindergarten during his tenure, with plans to continue that growth through eighth grade over the next years. Fundraising totals had tripled since the new head had begun, and the parent survey feedback had improved dramatically each year. By all metrics, the school was succeeding beyond the expectations of the board of directors. And yet, they were not happy with their head of school. Unable to define the gap, they declared it a mismatch from a chemistry perspective and did not renew his contract. The head went on to another school where he reached the same metrics. The board of directors felt incredibly blessed to work in partnership with such a talented leader and offered him a three-year contract with the hope that he would stay for the rest of his career.

We often look at leadership programs and try to design learning opportunities that will prepare our leaders for success in any school. My many years at the Day School Leadership Training Institute (DSLTI) have been filled with amazing successes. Emerging and new leaders explore the content of leadership through the lens of head of school, strengthen their management skills, and build a cohort. They are mentored through a year of practice and both problem solve and spend time on the balcony, examining their role and its leadership challenges from 30,000 feet. Prizmah’s leadership program for leaders include You Lead and HOSPEP, the Head of School Professional Excellence Project. You Lead is content-based, allowing participants to learn from expert facilitators on a variety of topics pertaining to day school leadership and debrief with a cohort of their peers. Because it is primarily completed online, asynchronously, it fits well within the life of a school leader at any level. HOSPEP takes new leaders and provides them with one-on-one coaching designed to develop their ability to think and reflect on leadership. That one-on-one coaching builds leaders’ capacity for deep understanding of the context of the school. All three of these programs are impactful in ways that can be quantified and have made a difference in the readiness of leaders to meet the ever-growing demands of the job.

Yet, we have not yet fully explored the real conditions that a leader needs to succeed. Prizmah, the recently established network of Jewish schools, who, supported by AVI CHAI and through the work of Rosov Consulting, has embarked on a study of existing leadership programs, in and out of the Jewish world. Our goal is to learn from existing examples so that we can design an array of options for professional and lay leaders to develop their skills, their dispositions, and their communities of learners. In addition, the Leadership Academy at Prizmah will spend the year examining and building on the results of that study to further explore those conditions needed for a leader to succeed.

Preliminary reports tell us that one of the study’s findings will relate to leadership dispositions and the way that some leadership programs use the concept of dispositions to frame learning opportunities. A lot of what people mean when they talk about chemistry (or lack thereof) is a reaction to divergent dispositions or to lack of awareness of how one’s unique leadership style functions in various settings with diverse partners. We see this most strikingly in the relationship between the board chair and the head of school. That relationship is built on open and transparent communication characterized by both support and candor. There is a trust that the two parties are in this work together and have each other’s backs. Successful board chairs and heads of school recognize that they may have differing dispositions, but they build a trust-based
relationship to make sure those dispositions function in a complementary way for the benefit of the school.

If we can unpack how dispositions function and train our leaders—both board chairs and school professionals—to be more aware of their own and others’ dispositions, I think we can move the needle on that prickly issue of “chemistry.” Understanding dispositions/chemistry, combined with an awareness of the conditions for successful leadership, will go far toward changing the landscape of leadership throughout the Jewish day school field.

Just as important as interpersonal dispositions are the external conditions in which good leadership thrives. The good news is that these conditions—which outlast the tenure of rotating board leaders—can be affected and improved through deliberate and concerted planning and training. Prizmah’s focus groups this year will zoom into the question of the conditions for successful leadership, and the findings will inform the resources we provide in order to support and nurture our leaders.

My work with the many leaders I have had the privilege of coaching has ingrained in me a belief in a number of conditions. We can influence these conditions by promulgating them to board members, search committee members, and heads of school themselves:

1. From the start, the hiring process needs to be transparent and inclusive. This builds community; ensures that teachers, parents, and sometimes students have a voice; and starts the head off on a good foot.

2. When a head moves to a new community, the community should work to welcome the whole family and help them get acclimated. We do not do enough to support the spouses of heads of school.

3. The board of directors has direct responsibility for supporting the head of school. The head needs to work to build the board’s trust, and the board must honor that trust with respect, nurturing, and the benefit of the doubt. There is no perfect head of school. Those who feel like they are in partnership with their boards of directors seem to thrive. Those who do not are often working in a state of tension that does not benefit the school. The support of the school does not need to be uncritical; it should include candor and honesty.

4. The core values of a board, including self-reflection, need to be constant. While the specific composition of a board will change from year to year, its core values should not. At the same time, the head is in the challenging position of being both the employee of an ever-evolving board and the holder of its core values, even its primary teacher. That dynamic, as anxiety-provoking as it might be, strengthens a school immensely.

5. There needs to be clear delineation between the role of the board and that of the head of school and professional staff. The relationship between the head and the board chair allows for constant dialogue around the gray areas. There is much that can be read on this subject.

6. The school needs to be strategic in its work so that it is not only focused on today but also on the future.

7. Schools that are focused not only on annual fundraising but also on building an endowment ensure that they can succeed in the future with a reduced burden on the annual budget.

These seven conditions certainly intersect with the concept of dispositions, and I have no doubt that what will emerge from the Rosov research will lead to an integrated approach for Prizmah to take in order to influence leadership. We know that day school leadership is lonely and stressful. It is also incredibly rewarding, as each day is filled with joy and purpose, not only for the children in the school but for the generations to come. At DSLT1, Prizmah, and throughout the field, all who are working to develop and
support our leaders have the privilege of constantly tapping into research and firsthand experience to ensure that we are providing the tools, the training, and the support for leaders as we build their capacity and entrust them with our Jewish future.

Jane Taubenfeld Cohen is dean of the Prizmah Leadership Academy and a senior mentor at the Day School Leadership Training Institute (DSLTI) at The Davidson School’s Leadership Commons at The Jewish Theological Seminary. She was the head of school at the South Area Solomon Schechter Day School for 22 years and coaches a number of leaders in the day school field.
Beyond Academic Excellence: Establishing Competitive Advantage in a Challenging Market

DR. MICHAEL A. KAY

Over the past 10 years, the market for North American Jewish day schools, particularly those that are not strictly Orthodox, has shifted dramatically. Affiliation with religious institutions in general has declined, and day school enrollment has been affected by this trend. Financial pressures have increased tremendously, as school tuition has risen faster than disposable income. And the very notion of parochialism in American society has been called into question, challenging schools to make the case for a type of educational community that is often perceived to be insufficiently heterogeneous.

In the corporate world, companies react to evolving market demand in different ways. Some make the bold decision to completely re-envision their products and services in order to meet shifting needs—think AT&T and IBM. Others, such as Chevrolet and Domino’s Pizza, publicly commit themselves to dramatically improving their existing products in order to attract customers to try them anew.

Neither of these approaches is an ideal strategy for Jewish day schools. We are committed to an ancient, sacred mission and to the enactment of a particular vision for the world, rather than to long-term survival for its own sake, and are therefore appropriately reluctant to pursue dramatic redefinition of our basic product. And while it is crucially important for our schools to offer a top-tier general academic program, even dramatic improvement in this area is simply not enough to differentiate ourselves sufficiently. Families have many educational options, and nearly all of them claim academic excellence as a primary selling point—it is therefore unrealistic to expect to attract attention to our schools with a marketing message that sounds like merely another voice in this chorus.

Ultimately, many non-Orthodox day schools face the unenviable situation of a dwindling core target population, strong competition at all price points (including free), and considerable financial and psychological obstacles to attracting the attention of new populations, even if the central educational product is top-notch. Must we therefore resign ourselves to a path of retrenchment?

Not so fast. The key to successfully turning the heads of mission-appropriate prospects who might not have seen themselves as “day school families” may lie in a tripartite strategy: placing our programmatic and marketing emphasis on building character, establishing an educational “Hedgehog Concept,” and promoting our schools as models for the pluralistic Jewish and American societies of the future.

BUILDING CHARACTER

When I speak with families about the factors driving their decision to enroll their children in our school, the concept of Jewish schools as “guaranteed mensch factories” is cited more than any other. This focus on character, values, and kindness is not only a moral imperative, but a strategic opportunity as well. In a world dominated by news of childhood anxiety, bullying, and exclusion, schools that develop reputations as genuine bastions of respect and inclusivity and as incubators of ethical conscience can truly distinguish themselves in a crowded marketplace. Should our schools be able to accomplish this successfully—a difficult
task not to be taken for granted, as our communities face the same at-times-insidious social pressures as others—we should be unabashed about promoting it as a selling point. Increasing the likelihood of nurturing a human being of strong character matters significantly to families, even in places where academic rigor reigns.

EDUCATIONAL HEDGEHOG CONCEPT

Jim Collins introduced the Hedgehog Concept in his landmark 2001 book *Good to Great*, based upon the work of philosopher Isaiah Berlin. Collins argues that every organization should focus its attention on an activity that 1) inspires passion in the organization, 2) is something at which the organization can be the best in the world, and 3) drives the generation of sufficient resources (in the case of schools, students, and funds) to enable the organization to thrive.

Jewish day schools have the capability to draw attention to themselves by establishing a Hedgehog program—something of widespread appeal but outside the traditional core of academic subjects and sufficiently splashy to attract broad attention. At Schechter Westchester, our Engineering and Entrepreneurship (E²) program seeks to fulfill this function. In this four-year sequence, students learn advanced principles of coding, electronics, and physical computing, and they work collaboratively in our three maker spaces to design products, fabricate working prototypes, and pitch their companies to real-life entrepreneurs. Each new product is designed to address a social problem in the world, in pursuit of what we call *Tech-un Olam*. Parents rave about the technical engineering competencies that the students develop, as well as the creativity, collaboration, empathy, and public-speaking skills that are crucial to success in the program. The number of Schechter Westchester graduates accepted to university programs in engineering and computer science has skyrocketed, and one team has a US patent pending. The program has attracted media attention, hundreds of thousands of dollars in grant funding, and several students who reported that E² was a decisive factor in their choosing us over public school.

MODELING THE JEWISH/AMERICAN FUTURE

Jewish day schools prepare students more effectively than any other type of institution for engaging with diversity. This seemingly counterintuitive statement may in fact be our most valuable selling point in the 21st century. Jewish tradition has long been characterized by the interplay of multiple perspectives and the imperative to craft community among individuals and groups whose systems of belief and practice differ from one another. Our schools are uniquely suited to inculcate students with strong, individualized identities while preparing them to engage actively with difference in their adult lives. We hear repeatedly from our graduates that on their college campuses, they feel empowered to establish substantive relationships with people whose worldviews and backgrounds differ markedly from their own, because they had spent so much time in their Judaic studies classes learning to articulate their own perspectives and interacting meaningfully and respectfully with people with different viewpoints. By emphasizing our unique ability to train young people of divergent views to build community with one another without seeking homogeneity, Jewish day schools may be able to overcome damaging misconceptions and position ourselves as a highly progressive educational option that is closely aligned with the demands of the modern world.

The fundamental challenge facing our field is ensuring that we can differentiate our schools’ core educational product from that of other outstanding institutions, particularly as our unique brand of Jewish life and learning is proactively sought out by a shrinking core constituency. Once the baseline expectation of fundamental academic excellence—crucial to have, but probably not enough to be truly differentiating—has been ensured, perhaps the most promising path may be to focus our leadership attention on the prioritization of three areas:
• Cultivating a culture of radical *menshlechkeit* within the school and—importantly—a public reputation to match;

• Establishing a buzzworthy Hedgehog Concept program that is related to an academic discipline but sufficiently distinctive; and

• Emphasizing the critical role that Jewish day schools have to play in modeling the pluralistic world of the future by nurturing the now-indispensable skills of developing an individualized identity, articulating it eloquently, and engaging constructively with people who think and act differently.

This combination may present a key to attracting an ever-broader array of families and enabling our schools to thrive though the uncertainty of a changing market.

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### Is Personalized Learning a Path to Reversing Enrollment Trends?

**YOSSI PRAGER**

Day schools are a supercharged engine of American Jewish life. Research has long shown that they are the strongest generators of Jewish practice, communal life, and charitable giving to Jewish causes. Moreover, research in 2010 confirmed that day schools disproportionately produce leadership for Jewish organizations.

It should not be surprising that day schools have a unique impact. They socialize and educate young Jews when their minds and hearts are, in the words of Pirkei Avot, a clean parchment. They provide children with Jewish community, peers, and role models. Judaism seeps into their being as they gain Hebrew language skills, literacy in basic Jewish texts, the songs and rhythms of Shabbat and holidays, trips to Israel, and other backbones of a rich, multifaceted Jewish life.

In addition to being an engine of Jewish life, day schools reflect Jewish life in the sense that enrollments evolve with the changing demographics of American Jewry. The latest census by Dr. Marvin Schick (based on 2013/14 enrollment data) shows that while day school enrollment grew significantly over the prior 20 years, almost all of the growth had been in the Haredi sector. Modern and Centrist Orthodox enrollment has been fairly steady, while enrollment in non-Orthodox schools has been slipping in recent years, with the greatest decline in Solomon Schechter and Reform day schools. Some of the decline in the Schechter and Reform schools is due to below-replacement birthrate, leading to a smaller pool of children, and another factor is the post-denominational thrust of American Jewish life, which has led some schools to shift their affiliation from denominational to community/pluralistic.

Outside of the Haredi world, the question of how to maintain and increase enrollment is top of mind for day school and other communal leaders. The greatest challenge is for community, Schechter, and Reform day schools, where the declining pool of children means that schools will need to penetrate their markets more deeply simply to maintain a stable enrollment. *Expanding* enrollment will require even greater penetration.
How can day schools increase their market share?

There is, of course, no simple answer. Part of the solution lies in marketing at the national and local levels, changing the climate of opinion and helping parents to understand the value of day school education. Even communal leaders have wondered how day schools are cost-effective given the proven impact of Jewish summer camping, which costs less. We need to find language that resonates in the 21st century to explain why the outcomes of intensive and immersive Jewish education should not be passed up.

But marketing takes us only partway. Schools must actually succeed in their substantive goals. From a Jewish perspective, if a day school education offers no better Jewish educational outcomes than a summer camp, parents would have every reason to combine public or private school education with summer camping. From an academic perspective—general and Jewish studies—day schools also need a distinctive educational value proposition. In the balance of this article, I introduce the notion of personalized learning and argue that embracing this educational/pedagogic approach has the potential to improve educational effectiveness and give day schools a marketable value proposition: at the leading edge of the personalized learning movement.

PERSONALIZED LEARNING

Say “schools,” and most people picture teachers lecturing at the front of rooms to rows of children in desks. While this style remains common in American education generally, and in Jewish day schools as well, the nature of education is changing, and the pace of change is increasing. These changes are leading to more personalized, and I believe, effective and confidence-building education for students. The summary here is drawn from AVI CHAI’s experience and a forthcoming report on blended learning in 36 day schools by Dr. Leslie Santos Siskin of NYU.

One force driving change is the easy availability of technology. Not long ago, children used computers in labs during one period of the day. Today, more and more schools have the ability to provide a computer for each student as needed (through shared tablets or Chromebooks that are carted around the school). These computers and a slew of free software programs enable teachers to add resources—curricular material, videos, and games—to enrich general and Jewish studies classrooms. And students can access many technological resources to help with homework. For example, websites such as Sefaria enable students to quickly access most of the Jewish canon, with a growing number of texts in English. Khan Academy provides tutoring in math to students who need extra help. And technology enables new kinds of communication with parents, including electronic access to homework, attendance records, and progress reports/grades.

These new resources and communication tools are increasingly common in day schools. A smaller number of schools and teachers are taking the next step, which involves restructuring class time to enable a blended learning approach. Instead of all students learning the same material at the same pace, technology enables students to spend some of their time working independently, at their own pace, using software to learn new material and practice what they have learned. The computer work instantly generates assessment data for teachers who can (with training) tailor their teaching to the individualized educational needs of each child. Having a portion of the students working independently enables educators to teach smaller groups or even individuals as necessary.

The independent student work can be facilitated by software such as i-Ready for math and other subjects, and Lexia for reading. On the Jewish studies side, existing curricula such as iTalim for primary-grade Jewish studies and Bishvil Halvrit/NETA for middle and high school Hebrew language have been upgraded with
multi-level games and robust learning management systems (LMS). These systems provide a wealth of data on class and individual performance that can support personalized learning. Some schools have integrated online courses in general and Jewish studies to supplement the course offerings available in school. The Lookstein Virtual Jewish Academy and the Online Judaic Studies Consortium offer different models for fully online Jewish studies courses that can enable schools to offer classes or approaches not otherwise available.

There is one additional, radical step that has thus far been implemented by a small number of schools and teachers. These teachers have not only added resources and restructured class time but have used blended learning to allow for a different kind of relationship between students and teachers. Students gain greater control over the content, pace, and modality of learning, helped by the availability of software and websites that expand the range of ways for students to learn, practice, and produce. Teachers manage the learning process, helping students plan, learn, and then master content and skills. Students demonstrate their mastery at least in part through projects that generate products that are useful to people outside the school community. In the process, students gain increased enjoyment and greater skill.

Such change in instructional role and practices requires high teacher motivation and intensive professional development. What is significant in Dr. Siskin’s research is the shared vision across the 36 schools she studied of a changing role for teachers. Teachers will continue to play a critically important role in support of students and their learning, but frontal teaching will no longer be the norm.

LOOKING FORWARD

As noted above, almost all day schools today offer technology-enhanced education, but the move away from frontal teaching toward student-owned, personalized learning is happening slowly. Many schools prefer slow evolution, especially since personalized learning is still at the cutting edge, meaning that the educational outcomes of the new approaches are not yet proven. Furthermore, a successful change in instructional role and practice requires a massive commitment in which the school’s professional and lay leadership are all explaining and advocating the change to the parent body and larger community. Especially in long-established schools, it is very hard to generate broad-based support for an as yet unproven and thus risky change.

However, I believe that in communities where enrollment stability/growth depends on greater market penetration, the risk of not changing may be greater: a decline in enrollment in schools perceived to be “tired” or of uneven quality. Boldly embracing and then effectively implementing personalized learning offers a change in the equilibrium that holds the potential to rejuvenate or jumpstart the reputation of local schools. More than that, the new pedagogy holds the possibility of enabling each child to maximize his/her own general and Jewish potential. Isn’t that what schools are for?

In addressing the day school recruitment challenges, we can help each other develop the right language to explain why the Jewish outcomes justify the tuition. The actual education is more of a school-by-school decision, based on the educational context and beliefs. Schools seeking to emphasize the distinctiveness of their personalized learning will find support among a still small but growing number of leaders and teachers who are bringing a revolution to their classrooms.

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Educating for Curiosity, Empathy, and Imagination

NORA ANDERSON

Through the end of the 20th century, education evolved in slow and systemic ways. The Industrial Revolution in the late-19th century ushered in the Industrial Age, and the digital revolution in the mid-20th century spurred the emergence of the Information Age. In the traditional model of education, born in the Industrial Age with a one-size-fits-all approach, students learned about history and how to read, write, and do arithmetic. The education system emphasized memorization and judged students by their ability to recall factoids on multiple-choice exams.

Today, rapidly evolving technology is transforming the way that knowledge is imparted and absorbed. The internet now plays a crucial role in the digital educational environment. In 2005, Daniel Pink wrote the book *A Whole New Mind*, where he introduced the term “the Conceptual Age.” According to Pink, the Conceptual Age demands that students develop areas of the brain that include empathy, design, innovation, story, play, and meaning—namely, higher-order thinking skills. “If we want students to become good critical thinkers, we need to teach critical-thinking skills, rather than assuming that students need to learn basic skills before they can engage in higher-order thinking.”

Twenty-first-century skills of collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and creativity have changed the way we, Jewish educators and leaders, need to approach the way we teach. The questions we need to answer in an ever-changing world are critical to how we lead our schools. Namely, how do we foster curiosity in our students in both Judaic and general studies? How do Jewish educators ensure that tradition is immersed in new educational methods? Are we throwing out memorization of text for the benefit of critical thinking? What is the role of the Jewish day school educational leader? How do we effect everlasting change that remains true to Jewish tradition while moving students to care? What is innovation in Jewish life? The answers to these questions must reflect the vision, mission, and culture of each school. Yet, without these answers we run the risk of graduating generations of apathetic students who do not see the relevance of elementary, middle, and high school education in their lives.

Albert Einstein said, “Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution.” Imagination, ideation, empathy, creativity, and innovation should not happen in one room or one lab. Imagination and innovation are mindsets that happen in an environment that celebrates students’ stories, passions, interests, and goals. This environment needs to go beyond the “innovation room” or the “makers space” that have become almost ubiquitous in today’s educational landscape. In order to spark each student’s innovative curiosity, these ideals need to be part of a full school culture and the way we teach every child, all the time.

Crucial to this mindset shift is education. Educating faculty happens through systemic and comprehensive professional development and understanding that the changes will not be immediate but will take time. As with every professional development initiative, support, role modeling, feedback, and accountability are the avenues for culture change. Ultimately, we want our Judaic and general studies faculties to have shared language, plan together, and view integration, curiosity, and critical thinking as their mandate and responsibility when teaching the next generation of critical thinkers and leaders.
At Carmel Academy, we have dedicated years of professional development and parent education to ensure that through traditional sacred text learning and critical thinking skills, our students gain empathy for the world, identify needs, and take action. An example of this is our Yamim Noraim project-based learning that we undertook with our middle school students this fall. At the center of Rosh Hashanah tefillot are three unique blessings: Malchuyot, Zichronot, and Shofarot. The liturgy describes three characteristics through which we can relate to God. Malchuyot: crowning God as King; Zichronot: remembrance; and Shofarot: blast that calls to action. Then on Yom Kippur we read the Avodah, the detailed account of ancient Jewish service to God.

Our middle school students learned, experienced, and took action on these blessings—first by studying the verses and then further exploring the meaning of those verses through experiential programs that took them off campus into the real world. We wanted the liturgy to come alive for the students, to transform the words on the page with a clear, cohesive message for the way we live our lives.

Our eighth graders studied the liturgy regarding crowning God as King through the idea of service. In visiting the US Military Academy at West Point, they learned why people dedicate their lives to service through military work. Our students heard about personal sacrifice and the satisfaction of giving back. After the trip, they discussed what it means for them to have a calling to serve something bigger than themselves. They reflected on what might be their calling to serve and how the trip connected back to the Malchuyot prayers.

Our seventh-grade students studied Zichronot, the idea of God as one who remembers our actions, our merits, and our intentions. They visited a cemetery where they cleaned old graves and made “remembrance” stones, which they then placed on the graves of people who are too easily forgotten. They explored the question, “What is the role of memory in our sacred tradition?”

Our sixth graders studied the liturgy surrounding Shofarot and visited the Anshe Chesed synagogue in New York City where they learned about a homeless shelter that runs every night at the synagogue and met with leaders of Midnight Run, which provides food for homeless people. There, the students learned how the synagogue’s call for action is to care for the homeless.

This liturgy asks us to take action, to remember those who are not as privileged as we are, and to support those who face challenges that we cannot imagine. The end result of this project-based, experiential-learning program is enduring lessons that we hope our students will remember and act on for life.

Effective leaders think deeply about the needs of today’s students, they are curious about how to best reach each and every faculty member and child, and they demonstrate and provide space for learning, experimentation, failure, and success. In today’s educational environment, we can claim success when our students leave our schools more curious than when they entered, when they are empathic and assume responsibility for making the necessary changes to improve the world, and when they take risks and understand that failure is part of success.

Nora Anderson is in her 15th year as Carmel Academy’s head of school. She has been a presenter at RAVSAK and PEJE Conferences, served as a mentor in the RAVSAK / AVI CHAI SuLaM program for heads of school with limited Jewish background, and is currently a mentor in the Day School Leadership Training Institute (DSLTI), a joint JTS and AVI CHAI foundation venture. Nora has also served on the Board of the Connecticut Association of Independent Schools (CAIS) and is a member of the CAIS Leadership Institute Steering Committee.
Day Schools Provide the Best Preparation for Civic Engagement

DR. BRUCE POWELL

“American education is too much about measuring, and not enough about meaning.”

—Shlomo Bardin, c. 1930

Most education today focuses upon test scores, college admissions, and measures. We know these are important, but not in isolation, as they have very little to do with what is important in life. While hard work and good grades are expected from our children, we, as Jewish educators, also understand that education in the Jewish community has always been a top priority and a key ingredient to leading a rich, meaningful life imbued with a duty to community and service. Our goal should be to pass down values, culture, meaning, purpose, and behaviors. Josiah Royce put it best: “Teach those skills which the civilization has found to be indispensable.” Nearly all Jewish high schools in North America are college preparatory institutions with extraordinarily high graduation and college enrollment rates. So what does a Jewish high school offer that goes beyond narrow views of educational purpose and is so important, so transformative, so unique, and so worth the journey?

First, Jewish day schools provide a vibrant, intellectual community where students understand that kindness must combine with academics, where powerful knowledge without goodness is a dangerous thing, and where goodness without deep knowledge is weak.

Second, Jewish day schools offer unique and superior academic learning environments where Jewish studies courses enhance the overall academic program. The study of Talmud or Bible, for example, demands continuous engagement with the higher order thinking skills of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. These thinking skills are core to great writing, literary vision, scientific inquiry, historical understanding, mathematical problem solving, and second or third language acquisition. The hevruta method of learning, for example, a method that teaches 21st-century skills of collaboration, deep questioning, and clear paths to action, is a mainstay of almost every Jewish high school in the nation. This method enables and enhances learning in all disciplines.

Third, Jewish high schools create unique cultures founded upon Jewish values and actions. For example, the Talmud asks six questions of human beings:

- Were you honest in business?
- Did you make a set time to study?
- Did you raise up community?
- Did you have hope?
- Did you act with wisdom?
- Did you understand a big thing from a small thing?

These questions drive students’ thinking in how they interact with their fellow human beings (honesty in business); the importance of lifelong learning; the importance of vibrant community building and an understanding of one’s obligations to that community; how to develop wisdom for life’s tough choices; and
how to gain perspective about what is truly important in life and students thereby develop a mature ability to distinguish what is not worth pursuing.

Fourth, Jewish high schools help students find their “prophetic voices,” using their deep knowledge and skills to determine what is ethical, what is moral, what is obligated, what must be said, and when to remain silent. The prophetic voice continues to power the single, most transformative revolution in human history—ethical monotheism—a revolution that continues to demand moral and ethical behavior and justice, and to envision peace and the unity of humankind.

Fifth, Jewish high schools enable students to discover who they are and what they stand for. Many parents have approached me over the past decades worried that our schools are “too Jewish.” They worry that their children will not be able to handle the multicultural life on American college campuses. They are concerned that the Jewish high school creates a bubble for our children and does not introduce them to the realities of modern life. The opposite is actually the case. Students from Jewish high schools are far better able to handle the social complexities of college campus life. They are secure in their identities. Instead of blending in and disappearing into the vast student populations on large campuses, they stand out. They are able to contribute their unique Jewish culture and values into the multicultural conversations.

Lastly, a Jewish high school is an inclusive community that takes seriously Jewish values such as visiting the sick, welcoming guests, not standing idly by the blood of one’s neighbor, being careful with speech, and embracing the “other.” Jewish values require that our schools include and embrace. Jewish high schools are community assets that welcome all with open hearts and hands.

In the midst of our chaotic world today—constant turmoil, ethical confusion, questionable truths, social insecurities, and lack of clarity regarding the human condition—Jewish high schools are no longer a luxury, but rather an existential necessity for the Jewish community of America. They instill strong Jewish values and learning so as to ensure Judaism’s contribution to America. Jewish high schools provide the content, values, and vision for that unique contribution. Indeed, the Jewish high school moves the vision for education from measuring to meaning.

Dr. Bruce Powell is founder and current head of school of the de Toledo High School (dTHS), formerly New Community Jewish High School, in West Hills, California. In addition to founding dTHS, he has helped to found, develop, and lead two other Jewish high schools in the Los Angeles area over the past 37 years including the Milken Community High School and Yeshiva University of Los Angeles High School. He is a founding DSLTI mentor and has also consulted on the development of 23 Jewish high schools in cities throughout the United States. Dr. Powell holds a PhD in Education from the University of Southern California and has won both the Milken Family Foundation Jewish Educator Award (2005) and the Covenant Award (2008) for his contributions to Jewish education.
Jewish Studies in Day School: A View into the Present and Future

MITCHEL MALKUS

Only 10 percent of all Jewish school-age children attend day schools in the United States even though we know it is the most effective way to build the foundation of a strong Jewish identity and knowledge base. While the product is outstanding, the vast majority of families with Jewish children do not perceive the value of a day school education to be high.

In 1991, the Commission on Jewish Education in North America published a report titled A Time to Act. On the heels of the 1990 Jewish Population Survey that found declining Jewish engagement and rising intermarriage, Jewish educational organizations, and particularly day schools, experienced renewed energy. For more than a quarter century, Jewish studies in day schools have evolved significantly. As we consider the future of these schools, it is valuable to take stock of the current curricular landscape and to offer some suggestions for what Jewish studies might look like in the coming decades.

Current Jewish studies curricula in day schools are informed by three predominant notions: how Judaism relates to modernity, significant advances in pedagogical approaches in general education, and the opportunity for students to choose their course of study. About the same time as A Time to Act was released, Michael Zeldin, former senior national director of the HUC - JIR School of Education, wrote that the relationship between Judaism and the “curriculum of modernity” was at the center of the educational experience in day schools. Jonathan Sarna frames this idea as the fundamental question of being Jewish in America: how to live in two worlds at once, how to be both American and Jewish. Curriculum in day schools today also reflects wider changes in general education and the growing knowledge base of what constitutes effective teaching and learning. Last, Jewish day schools, particularly at the high school level, have been influenced by our choice-based consumer society to employ curricular choice, specifically in Jewish studies where there are not specific state requirements.

Day school curricula have sought to integrate Jewish and general studies in significant ways. One example of curriculum integration now widely applied in day schools is Facing History and Ourselves (FHAO). FHAO integrates the study of history, literature, and human behavior with ethical decision-making and innovative teaching strategies. At the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School (CESJDS), where I serve as the head, we have tailored FHAO’s Holocaust and Human Behavior course to be used within our seventh-grade Humanities Experience block. Humanities experience is a block dedicated to grade-level, interdisciplinary, humanities-based units facilitated by teaching teams. The units are grounded in our core values and themes for each grade. At CESJDS, this experience integrates history and ethics and promotes an understanding of how Jewish values and texts are brought to bear on understanding and addressing prejudice. Large numbers of other day schools also integrate Jewish ideas, concepts, and values into their individual school-based general studies curricula.

A second area of integration in day schools is often within Jewish studies. At CESJDS we have developed a class called Judaics Workshop that is designed to nurture students’ relationship with two major features of Jewish life: Hagim (Jewish holidays) and Israel. Through hands-on learning experiences, students develop a deeper understanding and appreciation for the practices and themes associated with holidays, as well as the history, diversity, and innovation that characterize Israeli culture. The workshop provides students with an opportunity to apply the overarching themes of their grade level to Jewish content. For instance, seventh
grade, which focuses on the theme of community, explores Shabbat practices of Jewish people from different *eidot* (ethnic communities) around the world.

In the field of Jewish text, the Legacy Heritage Instructional Leadership Institute’s Tanakh (Bible) and Rabbinics Standards and Benchmarks programs are an example of best practices instructional methods from general education being used in Judaic studies. This program applies standards-based approaches to aid schools in articulating a coherent vision for their curriculum and provides sustained professional development to build individual school capacity to deliver high quality instruction. The standards and benchmarks inform the selection of materials, support the design of assessments, and provide guidance for the design of teacher professional development. At my school we have seen students become more deeply engaged in the study of Tanakh because the nature of this approach and how it connects students personally to their learning. Since building teacher capacity to develop lessons is central to the methodology, our teachers have also become more deeply engaged in their own learning and, subsequently, their teaching.

CESJDS, along with other schools, employs the Proficiency Approach for Hebrew language learning. Historically, when teaching Hebrew at our school, teachers emphasized the importance of learning to read. Learning to read in a new language helps students access class material and our faculty believed that by practicing this skill learners retained the language for a longer period of time. However, learning to read does not translate into language acquisition. Reading as a goal of language curriculum helps students learn *about* the language without giving them the opportunity to fully *acquire* it. Through the Proficiency Approach we have asked teachers to move away from teaching the rules and structure of Hebrew and, instead, to focus on the use of simulations so that students have a more authentic experience when using the language. The Proficiency Approach is based on the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) standards as a benchmark for curriculum and instruction. CESJDS uses these metrics to benchmark our students’ progress and the overall effectiveness of our Hebrew language curriculum. We assess students and collect data at key grade levels through an online, ACTFL standards-based assessment of language proficiency.

A third area in current Jewish day school curriculum relates to choice. While the vast majority of day schools are in the K–8 arena where schools generally only offer required classes, some Jewish day high schools have worked to embrace choice by offering their students options within the Jewish studies realm. As just one example, CESJDS created a Jewish Pathways program where students have the opportunity to forge their own journey in Jewish studies. The Pathways program provides students with options to specialize in Tanakh, rabbinics, modern Jewish history, or Jewish thought and philosophy. There is also a pathway for students who have not previously studied in a day school. This is just one of a few similar programs that seek to engage students through choice in curriculum.

**A VIEW INTO THE FUTURE**

Hebrew College president Daniel Lehman notes that much of the thought and language that animates contemporary day schools does not sufficiently capture the imagination of 21st-century North American Jews. He sees “in-marriage,” “Jewish literacy,” the “continuity of the Jewish people,” and “Jewish identity” as terms and concepts that no longer resonate with a significant percentage of American Jews. Instead, he suggests day schools should articulate their missions and develop curriculum around the conceptual categories of creativity, hybridity, transformative spirituality, textured particularity, and ethical audacity.

Philanthropist Michael Steinhardt attributes the lack of deeper day school penetration to the fact that too many contemporary Jews view the prospect of sending their children to an exclusively Jewish school as a step backward in their American engagement. Steinhardt proposes that day school curriculum better
balance Jewish and secular education. More specifically, he argues that day schools teach what he sees as the unprecedented level of Jewish achievement in the secular world as the basis for building pride and Jewish engagement in their students.

With this in mind, what might Jewish studies in day schools look like in the future? It is clear that to attract students, the conceptual frameworks of Jewish studies in schools must continue to evolve. Day schools must be committed to growth and change, while also amplifying what is currently working well. I see Jewish studies becoming more interdisciplinary in the future. Just as we see the emergence of hybrid fields such as biotechnology and neuroscience, day schools might seek to develop more interdisciplinary courses of study. In the realm of Israel education, there is an opportunity to learn about Israel through the prism of innovation and technology. Israel’s status as a “start-up nation” holds the promise that schools will look to teach about Israel in science, engineering, and other creative areas.

While day schools have been shown to be the most effective form of Jewish education, there are other areas, such as Jewish camping, that have evidence of success. Day schools should seek to emulate the spirit, community building, and emotional engagement seen in camps around areas such as tefillah, Jewish living, and celebrations that have been less successful in day schools. Finally, day schools have an opportunity to engage their broader community in the education they offer young people by expanding to offer adult Jewish education. With the outstanding faculties and expertise in teaching day schools hold, there is an opportunity to bring the day school experience to an adult audience.

Rabbi Mitchel Malkus serves as head of school at the Charles. E. Smith Jewish Day School. He is a member of the board of the Consortium for Applied Studies in Jewish Education (CASJE), the editorial board of HaYidiyon, and a past DSLTI mentor.

Committing Ourselves to This Sacred Work

DR. SUSIE TANCHEL

Let us be honest with ourselves. Non-Orthodox Jewish day schools in the United States are at risk of becoming dinosaurs. Many Jews consider us parochial, insular, and as particularistic institutions in an increasingly universalistic world. Even as there is a rise in explicitly expressed anti-Semitism across this nation, the spirit of the communities in which many of us reside is still characterized by diversity, integration, universalism, and freedom. As a result, many Jews in these communities do not perceive Jewish day schools as reflecting these ideals.

The seismic shifts in both my home community and on the national level are telling: the number of Jewish preschools and non-Orthodox synagogues in greater Boston has decreased dramatically in the last few years, while formerly separate day school networks have combined to form one national organization. Moreover, the cost of private education continues to present an insurmountable challenge for many families. The National Association of Independent Schools’ data offers clear evidence that the number of families attending private schools has declined sharply as fewer in the middle class can afford it.

With interest and enrollment shrinking, day schools are in the precarious position of being at the nexus of two waning endeavors: the commitment to traditional Jewish institutions and the ability to pay for private
As things stand, there is more and more pressure on day schools to prove their raison-d’être. And yet, from my vantage point, non-Orthodox Jewish day schools remain a critical part of the Jewish fabric of our communities, and therefore I argue here that we must remain committed to this sacred work.

We must ask complex questions: Why are we here? What are we trying to accomplish? What can (and what do) we offer our children that is different from the schools around us? How do we prepare our children for an increasingly diverse, rapidly changing world? I believe the responsibility to respond thoughtfully, intentionally, strategically, and sustainably to these questions is shared by both day schools and the broader Jewish communities they serve.

In regards to purpose and presence, research has already shown that future lay and professional leaders of the Jewish community are far more likely to come from day schools. Our collective future thus demands strong Jewish days schools. Moreover, those who currently work for the Jewish community need—and deserve—a top-notch school for their own children.

To state the obvious: Jewish day schools need to continue to be academically excellent in order to prepare our children for the world they will enter, and we must promote this excellence as a core rationale to prospective families.

We must embrace and institute educational programs that reflect current advances from general education. We need to read, research, and respond to the most cutting-edge ideas and practices in the classroom. For us, this means teaching engineering and robotics as part of our expanded and integrated STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math) program, and incorporating instructional strategies that serve the increasingly diverse academic needs of our student body.

Academic excellence is critical, but it is not sufficient. We hold as our sacred missions the development of our children’s spiritual and emotional growth, alongside their intellectual development. For example, at Boston’s Jewish Community Day School (JCDS), we are one of three Jewish day schools in the country currently engaged in a pilot partnership with the Institute for Jewish Spirituality in which we are bringing mindfulness practices to our students, faculty, and staff. We have also created a comprehensive framework for teaching the Habits of Heart and Mind that enable our students to develop a strong sense of individual identity and the know-how to contribute to our pluralistic community with integrity, empathy, and humility.

Jewish day schools should also work to broaden the community of Jewish people we welcome into our buildings and at the same time engage more authentically with the world beyond our walls. As a former executive coach once shared with me, “We need to figure out how to be more like Netflix and less like Blockbuster.” We need to courageously adapt to, and innovate within, a shifting Jewish landscape, or we will be out of business.

At JCDS, we think proactively about how to be a welcoming space for the richly diverse Jewish population of greater Boston. We have made a concerted effort to be a school for families, including interfaith families, who share a commitment to raising Jewish children. We count ourselves fortunate to have families that represent a diverse range of Jewish ritual practice, observance, and beliefs, as well as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, race, and family structure.

If we are living up to our highest purpose as Jewish day schools, broadening our tent is a start, but it’s not enough. We must explicitly teach our children how to engage with difference. A presence of diversity in schools does not actually mean that children are interacting with those different from themselves. At our intentionally pluralistic school, we prioritize teaching our children how to accept and to engage with people
different from themselves. We explicitly and repeatedly offer our students the opportunities to develop the requisite skills, capacities, and inclinations to accomplish this. Once acquired, JCDS students have these skills for a lifetime. Thus, as our children grow, they are able to apply what they have navigated in the particular to the context of the universal.

There is much that we as Jewish day schools can do to remain relevant, fulfill our missions, and enact our values. And yet, despite our best efforts, we do not have the necessary financial resources to accomplish our goals. A community-wide response is needed. Schools, particularly small schools, cannot bear this responsibility alone. Many current parents at JCDS, for example, are already struggling to make tuition payments and are unlikely to give large gifts to the school's annual fund.

I am concerned these issues will only worsen without serious investment from the broader community who can contribute meaningful resources to the schools that shape our children's futures. There is great urgency to this now. If wealthy benefactors and thought leaders within a community care about the caliber of future Jewish leaders, if they seek to attract compelling Jewish communal professionals, and if they wish to create a vibrant, engaged and sustainable Jewish community, then they should be supporting their local day school and the national programs that support them, regardless of whether their own children or grandchildren attend.

I am hopeful that our future is bright and therefore remain as committed to this sacred work as ever. I feel confident that we will discover new, creative ways to use the current challenges as an opportunity to strengthen our institutions and communities, for our children. I can’t wait to see where we go.

Dr. Susie Tanchel is head of school at Boston’s Jewish Community Day School and a DSLTI alum. Dr. Tanchel holds a BA and PhD from Brandeis University. She has taught in pre-service teacher education programs, as well as many adult education classes in the greater Boston area.

Leaning Toward Inclusive, Racially Aware Jewish Day Schools

BENJAMIN MANN

White supremacists and neo-Nazis marched this summer through the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia. They ostensibly protested the removal of a monument honoring a Confederate general, yet their chants of “Jews will not replace us” suggested a broader agenda of hate. What will we, as Jewish educators, tell our students about such public expressions of racism mixed with anti-Semitism? What impact should such terrifying expressions of hate have specifically on us, on our educational and religious aspirations, and on our Jewish day school communities and our students?

As a day school leader at the Solomon Schechter School of Manhattan, I am compelled to respond to these events by creating learning communities and experiences that will prepare my students to be successful in a racially and ethnically diverse world. I hope to empower them to be positive agents for change that will help lead us toward a more just society. To do that, my colleagues and I need to help our students see beyond public displays of hate by avowed white supremacists to more easily ignored systems that perpetuate racism. We need to start with our own predominantly White, Ashkenazi school community, where a “colorblind” approach to education risks perpetuating false assumptions about American and Jewish culture
and history—such as the implicit and explicit message that being White is the norm against which individual and ethnic value is measured.

We must start talking about race. We should ask ourselves:

• What do we hope our students will understand about their racial identities?
• What do we want them to think and feel about racism when they encounter it?
• Why doesn’t our school community reflect the racial diversity of the larger Jewish community of New York City?
• How does what we do at school offer them the opportunity to explore these questions?

Our Jewish values compel us to talk about race. We believe that all human beings are created in the image of God (b’tezlem Elohim) and, as such, deserve to be treated with care and respect. This value calls on us to bring our biases to the surface and see past cultural blinders to the holiness within each human being. We also believe in klal Yisrael, maintaining positive and supportive relationships with Jews of all sorts. The Jewish community is racially diverse. According to the American Jewish Population Project of the Steinhardt Social Research at Brandeis University, at least 11 percent of Jews in the United States are people of color. Our commitment to klal Yisrael compels us to create Jewish communities where all of us are welcomed, seen, and valued.

At Schechter Manhattan, we are taking steps to examine our racial knowledge, increase our inclusiveness, and implement efforts to be an anti-racist institution. We have partnered with Be’chol Lashon—an organization that provides opportunities for Jewish professionals to actively engage in conversations about race, ethnicity, and identity in the context of Jews as a multicultural people in America—to help us plan professional development workshops for our teachers so that they can:

• Think about their own racial identities;
• Analyze the politics of race in America;
• Raise awareness of race in a Jewish context; and
• Create an environment of inquiry and openness to talk and encourage discussions about race and its impact on individuals and the community.

Our hope is to open up avenues for Schechter Manhattan teachers to think critically about our curricular and instructional decisions through the lens of what we hope our students will understand about race.

I want Schechter Manhattan to be an anti-racist Jewish day school, one in which students and faculty have opportunities to consider their racial identity, where the racial diversity of the Jewish community is reflected and valued, and where graduates have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to be successful in a racially diverse world and to be positive agents of change toward a more just society.

Our racial awareness work is also happening among our parents. Last year a group of parents stepped forward to lead a Conversations About Race Committee to discuss how they talk with their children about race in their lives. At one event, parents shared personal stories of how they talked about race growing up, in their family and community contexts, and then considered ways they can talk to their own children about race and racism. The dialogue brought both sadness and frustration, as well as a commitment to growth in racial awareness. The committee continues to disseminate useful information to Schechter Manhattan parents and plans to have more opportunities for parents to learn together.

Certainly, racial awareness is but one of many intersecting aspects of our students’ lives. This specific work must be integrated within our broader mission to nurture young people with strongly grounded Jewish identities. But it is our aspiration to inculcate Jewish values and inspire our students to make Jewish
commitments that makes teaching them about race and racism so important. We should be leading toward anti-racist Jewish day school communities because it is an expression of our Jewish obligations to care for others and pursue justice.

When anti-Semitic hatred is spread by white supremacists, I am reminded of how important those obligations are. Let’s use this critical moment in time to compel us to make our day schools more race conscious so we can root out racism wherever it exists.

Benjamin Mann is the head of school of the Solomon Schechter School of Manhattan. For nine years, Ben worked as the head of middle school and Jewish studies coordinator at Schechter Manhattan. Prior to that he taught humash and served as middle school coordinator of special services and Judaic studies curriculum at the Solomon Schechter Day School of Bergen County. Ben is currently pursuing doctoral studies at The Davidson School and is a DSLTI alum.
Leading with Our Heart

JERRY D. ISAAK-SHAPIRO

The juxtaposition could not be more jarring—or more instructive. Yom Kippur’s Torah reading (as opposed to the ones on Rosh Hashanah that offer vivid insights into the lives of our ancestors) is all about the how and the what and the when of ritual. That it’s a bull for the purification sacrifice and a ram for the burnt offering: that Aaron is dressed in linen and that he’s to bathe himself before dressing—these and so many other instructions serve as a biblical how-to guide.

The haftarah following these very specific directives is Isaiah’s extraordinary (even for a prophet) exhortation to the people, not so much on what to do as how to live. True, there are those commanding pleas to untie the cords of the yoke—to let the oppressed go free, share your bread with the hungry, etc. But while these and all the other searing petitions for changing one’s behavior do invoke specific images and call for particular action, they collectively are asking to go beyond the what and the how and the when—again, the ritual—to make a case for ethical living, the quintessential “how” question.

In case the comparison is too subtle, Isaiah lays it out pretty explicitly: “Is such a fast I desire, a day for people to starve their bodies?” In other words, is the ritual of fasting what is really being asked of you?

“No, this is the fast I desire: to unlock the fetters of wickedness . . . to break off every yoke . . . to take the wretched poor into your home.”

Ritual and the clarity of moral behavior. What we do and why we do it. Our Sages brilliantly coupled these two readings to provide us with a balanced perspective, to teach us that we do indeed need both. One without the other—either one without the other—rings hollow. Heads of school and others in leadership positions recognize that our jobs are comprised of both—the “ritual” of balanced budgets and bureaucratic efficiencies and the legal dictates of hiring and dismissing practices; and the “ethical” imperatives of our positions—the less quantifiable, equally essential role of mentor and role model. Of teacher.

In keeping with all fine-line realities, this should not be misconstrued to imply that morality cannot be found in a balanced budget or in an efficiently run institution. Balancing all those interminable figures by means of an intentional process of weighing true needs against just-as-true needs provides a lesson in morality just as clear and just as profound as the one found in the Tanakh class in which the lessons are overt and explicit.

Decisions, decisions. To posit that both are essential is not only obvious, it’s a philosophical cop-out. Yes, our jobs and the schools in which we exercise our craft demand the “ritual” of spreadsheets and reports and best professional practices. To say otherwise would be absurd. Yet sometimes, in certain contexts, making a determination is an act of moral clarity in and of itself. In that light, and with no disparagement meant to the ritual of our jobs, it’s the other side of the ledger that’s paramount. Even if it’s a 51-49 point difference (irony department: quantifying the relative significance of that which can’t be quantified), the “how” supersedes the “what” if we’re to remain true to our collective mission and vision.

A case in point: allocating resources for inclusion—special training, smaller student/teacher ratios, additional specialists—is often criticized as an example of woefully poor administrative judgment—simply too many dollars aiding too few students. Choosing to see budgets as a zero-sum truism may be ritualistically prudent and accepting the conventional paradigm (“It’s just too expensive.”) may pay homage to bureaucratic experience, but it’s decidedly not in keeping with a prophetic heritage. DSLTI is rightly fond of describing the head of school as the “keeper of the Jewish mission” and the “educational visionary.” Allegiance to that
mission and that vision is exemplified by replacing the old axiom (“too expensive”) with a new one (“It’s worth it. Let’s figure out how to pay for it.”)

I’m leery of the comparison (at least it’s not another Heads-are-like-Moshe allusion), but if Isaiah doesn’t do it for you, there’s another primary source that’s a close second—Aaron Sorkin. At the end of The American President, Andrew Shepherd (Michael Douglas) responds to a question about his political rival’s characterization of him: “For the last couple of months, Senator Rumson has suggested that being president of this country was, to a certain extent, about character . . . I have been here three years and three days, and I can tell you without hesitation: being president of this country is entirely about character.”

Again, a caveat: trains running on time is not only not unimportant—it really is essential. (Along with carrying a rather tarnished pedigree, the metaphor of Mussolini’s efficient trains is most likely a fiction, which may suggest its own moral.) Very few of those Big Ticket (aka the truly important) items will ever see the light of day if not for smooth and competent management. Just as the kevah of ritual allows for the kavanah of purpose, the management of our schools paves the way for the development of enthusiastically engaged, proudly knowledgeable Jews. But if we’re to “err” ever so slightly in one direction over the other; if we’re to put a drop more of our attention and energy and mindfulness in one of those glasses, I’ll side with Isaiah. Or at least Michael Douglas.

Jerry Isaak-Shapiro is a graduate of the Mandel Jerusalem Fellows and has served as head of school of the Agnon School (renamed in 2015 as Joseph & Florence Mandel Jewish Day School) since 2003. Jerry has been a mentor in RAVSAK’s Sulam leadership program and continues to serve as a mentor in DSLTI. For 10 years he was the executive producer and host/moderator of A Jewish Perspective, seen on San Francisco’s NBC-affiliate channel four, and was the San Francisco Jewish community’s Middle East specialist for six years.

Sustaining Our Day Schools: Will We Heed the Call?

DR. RAY LEVI

It is heartening to know, after reading the perspectives of the creative day school leaders who have challenged us in this issue of Gleanings, that there are many who can act both boldly and thoughtfully to help us envision a future for our day schools that our community and our world so badly need. Among their prescriptions is a renewed commitment to pluralism, embrace of diversity, and leadership driven by curiosity and engaged listening. Yet, they also call us to action in a manner that forces us to embrace our roles as day school leaders and supporters much differently then we have been. Will we heed the call?

In the 15 years since the groundbreaking publication of Visions of Jewish Education by Seymour Fox (z”l), Israel Scheffler (z”l), and Daniel Marom, we have had much opportunity to consider how schools must respond to the rapidly evolving ways in which we define our Jewish identifications and educational engagements. I, and the authors in this issue of Gleanings, argue that to secure the future of Jewish day schools, our visions must be more nuanced and deeper than they have been. In doing so, we have considered alternate models of educated Jews. However, did we forget to begin with our learners and their families? Put another way, have we tended to focus too much on how our programs would prepare our alumni to be leaders within our existing Jewish communities and not focus on asking, “What are the kinds of communities our graduates would like to be a part of and perhaps even create?”
Driven by a focus on a knowledge and skill based curricula, we may have not sufficiently considered how we would engage our students in developmentally appropriate ways so that classroom experiences would be meaningful throughout students’ day school careers.

How well are we listening to our constituencies? **Do our conversations as educational leaders reflect the conversations our families want to be having?** Questions about, for example, the diversity of our schools—real or perceived—have long been a deciding factor in the non-Orthodox world as parents look to the larger communities in which our students will live. Ben Mann asked us to move beyond our comfort zones, to go beyond our goals of developing perhaps superficial interactions in the larger world, and to begin to examine our own need for communal growth. Does the culture of our schools genuinely reflect the culture of our communities particularly if they include Sephardi or Latino communities? Are we attending to the differing needs of those who have chosen Judaism and those who are still on their journeys toward Judaism?

**How well are we listening to ourselves and our own vulnerabilities?** Consider these experiences of some senior day school leaders:

An Orthodox rabbi who is a head of school describes his ongoing anxiety when he leads services, growing, he believes, from a sense of having missed out on internalizing much about the liturgy during his childhood when his family arrived at services in time for Aleinu.

An administrator who is a Jew by choice acknowledges that she often feels distant from the community when she encounters texts that describe ancestral lineages that she does not share.

A school head describes the isolation he felt as a single father of an infant both in terms of parenting support from peers and assumptions about why he might be a solo parent.

A self-identified Tunisian Jew, feeling marginalized because the scholarship and liturgy of his community is not central to Jewish educational curricula, says that he is scared that the Jewish world he loves will not exist for his grandchildren.

Including others isn’t just about curriculum, it’s about going deeper. It’s about returning to those leaders—like those just mentioned—who have felt they are at the periphery of the community at different points in their lives. In many ways, DSLTI provides a laboratory for building a kehillah kedoshah among a remarkably diverse group of Jewish educators, a gathering place to examine the impact of all the experiences and anxieties described at the beginning of this piece. **The theoretical commitment to pluralism within this one particular program is challenged by the need to move past assumptions that we believe others have about us and to find ways to engage others deeply about belief and practice without offending.** Let’s be honest. It is easier to have conversations about vision and marketing and even to deliver difficult messages to staff members or parents than it is to be vulnerable about our deeply held beliefs, to share how we may feel we have been misunderstood within the larger Jewish community. Yet these critical conversations may be the most important ones for us to be having.

If DSLTI were really to be a laboratory for experiences that go to the heart of deep Jewish engagement and truly address a vision of Jewish education that places the whole person at the center, we need to move beyond our comfort zones to address those issues that have left us uncomfortable.

So we tried a bit harder. This past summer our current cohort engaged in dialogue around two central questions:
• What do you wish others understood about your personal Jewish practice, beliefs, or experience?
• What would you love to better understand about Jews whose practice is described as ________?

Our discussions only scratched the surface. I was struck by the relief there was among our group of leaders to share their questions in a place where their voices would be honored. Our schools must follow suit and have these important but frequently uncommon conversations. The magnitude of our impact depends on it.

Will we heed the call? Our promise and challenge for Jewish day schools and their future lies in part in bringing the stories and experiences of those feeling uncertain and on the margin to the center, even in denominational contexts that on the surface appear more homogeneous.

We must start by looking closely at ourselves and examining how we can move past our assumptions and oversights about race and culture and practice to genuine curiosity about the stories and vulnerabilities of others in the Jewish community.

We must start by becoming dedicated professional learning communities that explore across disciplines and methodologies and connect to our communities. We must start by moving beyond tefillah practice to mindful tefillah, from design thinking for makerspaces to design thinking for envisioning our Jewish communities.

We must start, as Michael Kay writes, by becoming places of radical menschlichkeit, moving from fear of loss to excitement about honoring the diversity of voices and experiences that could help us thrive for generations to come. Let us heed the call.

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