

# JEWISH **EDUCATIONAL** LEADERSHIP

**Learning from COVID** | Volume 19:3 | Summer 2021

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## JEWISH EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

is a publication of The Lookstein Center  
for Jewish Education of Bar-Ilan University.

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# Editors Intro

Throughout the COVID crisis, the discomfort of the daily uncertainty was often echoed in the familiar refrain of, “I just can’t wait to go back.” Zoom fatigue, social distancing, and the need to always be on watch, fed on each other in a spiraling yearning for going back to the familiar, to normal. Indeed, many schools did not hesitate to revert back to their “regularly scheduled programs” as soon as the guidelines permitted them, and were I to ask their leadership to reflect on what they learned, their answer would be something like, “We survived.”

For others, however, the changes necessitated by the pandemic forced a rethinking of almost every part of the educational process—the definition of learning, the school-home relationship, the vision of what constitutes an educational space and how it is used, the nature of what a school day looks like, the accessibility and role of the teacher, the school as an organ of the community, and even a deep gut-wrenching re-examination of the most visceral question of why we are engaged in Jewish education. That rethinking catalyzed a generation’s worth of educational transformation in the span of fifteen months—an extraordinary leap for any field. Some schools intuited that this was going to be a transformative moment and insisted that any changes they made to their programs be those that they would want to maintain afterward, others boldly experimented and kept the best ideas that they tried.

The breathtaking pace of change has generated extraordinary excitement and possibilities as well as a fair amount of anxiety—is the change too fast, without considering the positives of what was before? This issue of the journal looks at what we have learned from the crisis as we look forward. The core articles in the journal address administrative changes, educational adaptations, modifications to the school’s physical and technological infrastructures, re-evaluating the attention paid to the social-emotional well-being of students, and professional development and support for teachers. The range of ideas, including some that are brilliantly creative without being overly complex, is not only profoundly thought-provoking but truly inspiring. There is also the pushback, cautioning against radical change.

Precisely because things are moving so quickly, we added a new section to this journal, what we call the Learning Lab. These articles are shorter and reflect an ongoing process of thinking, reflecting, and experimenting. We invite you, the readers, to respond and share your own experimentation. We look forward to hearing from you as we venture into an unfamiliar era!

*Bivrakha,*

Rabbi Zvi Grumet, Ed.D.

# (COVID) Inspired Scheduling

Jonathan Kroll

Prior to the pandemic, the teachers and administrators at SAR High School frequently discussed student stress. We had, at times, sought to address it through various initiatives, some modest and some bold. As the pandemic raged last spring and we began to imagine the 2020-21 school year, we decided, first, to create more “down time” for students to alleviate the increased stress of this new reality. We adjusted our weekly schedule so that school would no longer end at 5:10; instead, dismissal was at 4:20 three days a week, 3:45 one day a week and 1:10 on Fridays. All disciplines had their instructional time reduced in order to create space for the earlier dismissal.

As this remarkable school year progressed, we began to consider some of the changes that we wanted to retain after the pandemic. Would Zoom be a permanent daily feature? The strong consensus is that we should be grateful for what Zoom afforded us during the pandemic but rely on it less going forward. What about other pandemic-related initiatives? After surveying parents, students, and teachers, we found broad support for maintaining an earlier dismissal time. With a bit of restructuring, our dismissal time for the upcoming school year is set for 4:35. We anticipate that students will have more free time to engage in activities that interest them. Some students will have free time before they eat dinner. Some students may get a head start on homework or studying. Others may hang out with friends. By creating a new block of time, we want students to have more control over the rhythm of their day.

After shifting dismissal time, we then lessened stress by reducing the number of assessments allowed per week. Pre-pandemic, underclassmen had up to three major assessments per week and upperclassmen had four. This year, all students were allowed only two major assessments per week. We found that, although some of the assessments included more material, student stress was lowered with fewer evenings devoted to studying. Teachers have also experimented with alternative assessments like projects and group work in order to promote and gauge student learning. By lessening our reliance on tests, we not only reduce student stress, but also work toward a less test-focused school day.



**Jonathan Kroll** serves as principal at SAR High School. Previously he was Head of School at Katz Yeshiva High School of South Florida. He began his career in Jewish education teaching at the Yeshivah of Flatbush. Rabbi Kroll earned his undergraduate and graduate degrees as well as semicha from Yeshiva University.

As we rethought tests, we then considered not only their frequency but also the ways in which they are administered. Specifically, we reconsidered the phenomenon of timed tests. Most teachers do not care how quickly a student completes a test, nor do teachers teach students how to answer questions quickly. In fact, most teachers place greater value on deliberation and careful thought when taking an exam. The primary purpose of timed exams was logistical: if a student does not finish the test in the 40-minute class period, they will be late to their next class. We aimed to find a way to let every student finish tests at their own pace but without disrupting life at school. We also wondered whether flexibly-timed tests would affect learning and student anxiety. After piloting a plan in a Gemara class and a math class, we gathered feedback indicating that learning improved and that students' stress and anxiety decreased simply by knowing that they could finish the test at their own pace. Therefore, for the upcoming school year, we are introducing a plan in our ninth and tenth grades for flexibly-timed tests. We've created two weekly test periods before a lunch period. Tests will take place during these periods, not during regular class time. Whether a student has a learning disability that qualifies them for extended time or not, they will be able to extend their time into the lunch period that follows. Our expectation is that many students will finish their test during the allotted class period but that nearly all students will complete their tests with 50% extended time. With this new system, we will test a student's knowledge rather than their speed.

The pandemic has helped us become more attentive to the stress our students experience. While many of its causes are beyond the purview of school, we can shift some levers to reduce our students' stress and anxiety. Over the next two years, we aim to gauge the success of these initiatives and do our best to foster a school environment that is reflective about our students' social and emotional wellbeing and their educational growth.

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# COVID as a Catalyst

Daniel R. Weiss

Winston Churchill once said, “Never let a good crisis go to waste.” While this past year has certainly put many schools into crisis mode, I believe that my school’s response has resulted in us being stronger today than we were before the pandemic began.

As the pandemic broke, Bornblum Jewish Community School (Memphis, TN) was nearing completion of a three-year strategic plan which included, amongst other significant changes, the creation of two significant positions: Director of Curriculum and Instruction and Director of Student Services. The school leadership and board committed to the goal of moving forward rather than sliding backward during the pandemic, and the implantation of those two roles placed the focus squarely on the school’s academic achievement while attending to the individual needs and social and emotional well-being of the students. Although each of these Directors spent considerable time this year working on our COVID protocols, each has also put together a five-year plan for helping our school push forward.

In addition, we knew that moving the school forward meant having on-campus learning for the 2020-2021 school year from day one, while ensuring that we provided an equally robust learning experience for the 10-15 percent of our students who started the year learning from home. Our system needed to provide flexibility for students who would need to stay home short or long term due to COVID precautions.

## Technology for Distance Learning

Creating a synchronous learning plan that would ensure that our distance learners would receive equivalent learning opportunities to our on-campus students required an investment in technology. We boosted our WiFi capabilities, increased our network licenses, and equipped each classroom with multiple cameras and microphones to allow for a full classroom view as well as an up-close view of the teacher. We purchased new laptops for 4th and 5th grade students, upgraded iPads for kindergarten through 3rd grades (our Middle School students have long had laptops for school), and integrated all classrooms by putting our Jewish and General studies teachers in the same room so that every teacher could have equal access to technology.

As we considered each of these upgrades in technology we regularly asked ourselves if



**Daniel R. Weiss** is the Head of School at Bornblum Jewish Community School in Memphis, TN. He is completing his Doctorate at Northeastern University in Educational Leadership. Daniel and his wife Jessica are parents to three boys, all current day school students.

these purchases would be both useful and mission-aligned post-COVID. For example, instead of purchasing webcams that would be permanently mounted in our classrooms, we chose to purchase free standing webcams that can be moved to other locations in the event that we want to livestream programs. Microphones and voice amplifiers can be used when classes move outdoors. And the upgraded networking capabilities will allow us to use technology in the classrooms without worry of WiFi or network slowdowns for the foreseeable future.

Coincidentally, just prior to COVID, we had begun to explore Microsoft Teams and its potential use in our daily classroom teaching. Once the pandemic hit we adopted the video streaming to be used both for our online learners and in the classroom. Through Teams, students can access and share files and interact with their teachers whether in school or at home. Going forward, these capabilities will allow us to reduce the number of school absences for students. On days when they are too sick to come to school but are not too sick to learn, we are able to provide them real-time instruction, which reduces the teachers' need to reteach material when a child returns to school. Additionally, the ability to quickly pivot to online learning when necessary has eliminated the need to cancel school due to external factors such as the weather. Six days of inclement weather this year became days where virtual learning was balanced by adequate time to play in the snow.

### Outdoor Spaces

Successfully being on campus this year forced us to reexamine our outdoor spaces and how they could be used more effectively, both to help mitigate the spread of COVID

and to provide teachers and students mask-free time. Applying our guiding question of "Can we use this post-COVID?" we looked at the possibilities to use our outdoor spaces to promote a physically and mentally healthy learning environment. An outdoor classroom/chapel which had fallen into disrepair was refurbished and became available as a classroom and *tefilla* space, and we added three additional covered areas as classrooms and eating areas. We purchased folding chairs for each student so that they could take their own seat outside with them for flexible seating.

### Integrated Learning


COVID inspired us to use our outdoor spaces more fully, and has reinforced our understanding of the power these spaces hold to engage students and promote learning across the curriculum. We created an integrated learning program using our gardens, allowing each class to have its own bed to plant vegetables, flowers, and herbs. These gardens created many opportunities for curricular connections in both general and Jewish studies. For example, first-grade students harvested mint which they planted and grew for a "Tea Party", complete with etiquette lessons and Hebrew vocabulary. Kindergarten students planted carrots (*gezer*) for their theme of being "to-gezer (together)". Middle School students, who planted kale, harvested their crop and learned to search for bugs as *kashrut* inspectors, and then made kale chips for a healthy snack. In the coming year, we plan to increase our integration of the gardens in Jewish studies by using them to teach about Israeli agriculture, geography and geology, and Biblical/Mishnaic agricultural laws.

Motivated to expand these opportunities, we raised funds to add a weather station, a greenhouse, a butterfly garden, a composting station, new outdoor games, and plans for a chicken coop to be installed this summer. The butterfly garden will include benches to allow students to have a space for relaxation, socializing, quiet reflective learning, and small group discussions, as well as serve as a classroom. Reimagining the butterfly garden as a unique educational opportunity has sparked new thinking about using the other new outdoor classrooms in unique ways.

### Closing Note

This article focused almost exclusively on the educational push which COVID gave us. There were certainly significant developments on the administrative side, including fundraising, community involvement, and recruitment. It is hard to pinpoint precisely how COVID played a role in those areas, but the net results include increases in enrollment, fundraising dollars, and number of donors, which we hope will continue beyond COVID as well.

Many schools and students around the world have experienced an unimaginable loss of learning during this pandemic. By embracing the challenge as an opportunity to reevaluate, it is fair to say that we have not wasted this crisis.



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# Thinking Adaptively: Reimagining Jewish Education in a Post- COVID Word

David Block



Professors Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky argue that the most common downfall of leadership is when leaders treat adaptive challenges as technical ones. That's when managers notice a cultural problem in their organizations and try to solve them by changing the length of weekly meetings. It's when schools treat narcotics issues with standalone anti-drug presentations. It's when we tighten a screw instead of admitting to a faulty foundation. Ultimately, it's when we choose to apply technical fixes instead of facing the reality that a paradigm shift is likely necessary. Recognizing the type of challenge is the key.

I believe we ought to see that formula as bi-directional. Sometimes, we're presented with solutions before we recognize the problems they can potentially solve. And whether we choose to see a given solution as the answer to a technical problem or an adaptive one makes all the difference. The current pandemic has brought precisely that choice to the forefront.

From an educational perspective, it's easy to see the technology upon which we've all come to rely as laden with potential. Yes, many are clamoring to hang up the old webcam and to permanently "accidentally" misplace their Zoom login credentials. But we may also notice that the ability to teach virtually has opened the doors to advantages that can, perhaps, extend beyond the Dog Days of COVID. For example:

**David Block** is the Head of School of Shalhevet High School (Los Angeles). Previously, Rabbi Block was Content and Curriculum Developer at Aleph Beta, taught at Rambam Mesivta (NY), and was Assistant Rabbi at the Jewish Center of Atlantic Beach. David was formerly the Director of and singer in the Maccabeats. David received rabbinic ordination at Yeshiva University and is currently working on his doctorate. He was a Wexner Graduate Fellow/Davidson Scholar.

- Technology may enable students to stay connected to the classroom even when they're sick at home.
- Online programs and software can continue to be tools for creative active learning activities.
- Virtual parent meetings and programs may remain preferable in order to save the hassle of travel to and from the school building.
- "Record meeting" features may help administrators capture meeting minutes more easily than before.

Those advantages are wonderful, but they are born out of a choice to see these advances as solutions to merely technical problems—illness, travel inconveniences, or meeting logistics.

But there's an alternative. What if we leveraged our discoveries during COVID to rethink elements of Jewish education?

### Reimagining Virtual Education

COVID did not introduce us to virtual learning. Indeed, online education certainly existed before the pandemic. But the past many months have taught us to think differently about the enterprise and how to maximize its effectiveness.

While we did not need COVID to tell us that online learning can be an effective educational model, it did open our eyes to how we might leverage that which we learned during the pandemic to address what is often missing in online models. In particular, COVID taught three crucial lessons, especially as they relate to hybrid learning models (in which some students learn in-person and others virtually):

First, parents, students, and educators who never had previously considered online

learning to be a viable model have now tasted its effectiveness (not without its challenges, of course). It may still not be ideal, but now that the pandemic has forced our hands, online learning is no longer a terrifying unknown. Some, in fact, have been pleasantly surprised.

Second, the pandemic has pushed us to invest in and explore new (or existing) technologies that not only optimize online learning, but also open the door to effective *synchronous* online learning (in which students learn from educators in real-time). Some examples include 360-degree cameras that allow virtual learners to feel immersed in the classroom; microphones that pick up not only the teacher's voice but also that of other students; speakers that project the voices of online learners to the in-person learning space; optimized internet broadband; and software that maximizes sharing and collaboration in hybrid classrooms.

Finally, many discovered that, when used creatively, online models do not preclude—and can very well enhance—building culture and community. Schools throughout the country used online platforms for game nights and virtual "hangouts"—all to facilitate social interaction and community. Virtual programs allowed us to *expand* our social circles: Students and parents were able to meet and learn with others around the world. Of course, simply learning on the same Zoom screen does not a community make, but it showed (or reminded us) the potential of the platform. Additionally, some found success in hosting events like energetic musical *havdalas* and *mishmar* programs, which helped facilitate that Jewish, spiritual, and religious culture that felt so elusive at the pandemic's start.

Admittedly, the pandemic may not have created new possibilities or produced radically

new technologies. But, for those open to thinking differently, it may have shifted our attitudes and pushed us to think creatively. In short, COVID not only forced us to ask: “What can we do now that we could not do before?” but also “What are we willing to do now that we didn’t even think to consider before?”

I believe that we now have new opportunities to think creatively about integrating various elements of virtual learning to address adaptive problems that our schools and communities face—both internally and externally.

### A New Model: Hybrid Satellite Learning

While some Jewish communities are able to support multiple Jewish day schools of various religious ideologies, other communities lack the financial wherewithal, population, and/or infrastructure to do so (if they can support a Jewish school at all). This forces parents to choose between various less-than-ideal options:

- They can send their child to a Jewish school that embodies values with which the family does not agree.
- They can send their child to a public school or non-Jewish independent school and attempt to supplement Torah learning and Jewish literacy at home.
- They can choose to send their child to board at a mission-aligned school away from home.

But what if there were a fourth option, one that enabled students to attend a school that shares their values without ever having to leave their hometowns?

Conversations with the thoughtful and diverse Jewish community in Scottsdale, AZ

led us (Shalhevet High School in Los Angeles) to think precisely about that fourth option. The Scottsdale community has limited options for Jewish high school. What’s missing is a place that caters to the Modern Orthodox community—both in terms of ideology and demographic. They deeply want to provide their children with a thoughtful approach to Judaism and meaningful Torah learning, all alongside a rigorous academic experience. And while the desire for such a school is there, the numbers aren’t.

Together we devised a model that takes into account the various needs of the community and uses the new frameworks to which COVID has opened our eyes.

First, students in Scottsdale will video into our live classes in Los Angeles. That synchronous education will enable Scottsdale students to learn in real time, to be full participants in class and feel part of the learning community. Technology (special cameras, microphones, speakers, etc.) will facilitate an authentic feel on both sides of the cameras: Students in Shalhevet will clearly see and hear the Scottsdale students regularly, and the Scottsdale students will feel as though they are part of the immersive learning environment created in the classroom. They are “regular” students, just attending class virtually.

Second, all of the Scottsdale students will be together in a dedicated learning space just as they would in an in-person school. This provides the possibility for two things. 1. There will be full-time educators on the ground both to facilitate and help student learning, and to ensure that not too difficult a strain is placed on Los Angeles teachers. 2. Perhaps even more valuable, having students together in one place helps build community

in Scottsdale. Students will *daven* (pray) together, eat lunch together, hang out with each other between classes, and engage in extracurriculars together.

Third, Scottsdale students will travel to Los Angeles multiple times a year to build friendships with peers, relationships with teachers, and to benefit from (and be a part of building) our larger culture. They'll participate in student orientation, Shabbatons, Color War, and more.

In short, the Scottsdale community can tap into the educational resources of Shalhevet in Los Angeles while engaging in active participatory learning, quality education, individualized in-person assistance, community with other online learners, community with students in the parent institution, and participation in major cultural and spiritual elements of the parent school. All of which is possible due to reorienting the way we look at that which we learned from COVID.

### Internal Adaptive Solutions

The above model uses the lessons of COVID to address a larger *external* adaptive problem—that is, the limitations of various communities to provide a mission-aligned Jewish education for their children. But the partnership creates many adaptive solutions that are more essential to the parent institution, too:

- It will help ensure that we do not become stagnant in our thinking and practice. A partnership like this puts a parent institution on the forefront of educational innovation—and, in forward thinking schools, the students are always ultimately the beneficiaries.
- It will magnify the return on our

investment to cultivate and grow our faculty. In addition to expanding the impact of that investment on the satellite school, it will help build the faculty's reputation in a wider audience and increase the sense of growth and job satisfaction in the teachers themselves, which in turn impacts significantly on education.

- The partnership expands the school's financial base, enabling it to provide even more for its students, and builds its reputation beyond the local community.
- Integrating students from a different community adds a different demographic, creating new educational opportunities for dialogue, empathy, and listening—diversification affords students the opportunity to learn from experiences that may be different from their own.

Of course, such a model does not come without its potential challenges:

- Schools must ensure that faculty in the parent institution do not get burned out from the additional load of teaching two sets of students simultaneously.
- It is crucial to get parent buy-in from the outset and to reinforce that their children's education will not be diluted.
- Finances can get sticky if all costs are not carefully considered from the outset.
- Finding the right educators on-the-ground can be quite challenging.
- Partnering communities need to be values-aligned.

### Conclusion

In an interview with Rabbi Dr. Ari Lamm

at Yeshiva University in 2017, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks z”l offered a brilliant insight into a difficult Biblical story. He noted that Yaakov’s fight with the man/angel (in Parshat Vayishlah) should be a blueprint for how Jews ought to handle struggles. After a long battle, the angel—who had just injured Yaakov—said to Yaakov, “let me go.” Yaakov boldly responded: “I will not let you go until you bless me.” Why would Yaakov want a blessing from one who tried to hurt him? But that, R’ Sacks said, should be our attitude through all difficult situations: I won’t leave it, and I won’t let the struggle leave me, until I take away something positive from it, until I can grow from it.

COVID wreaked havoc on so many of our communities. But what a lost opportunity it would be if we let it pass without taking away more than a handful of technical tools. Instead, we ought to think about how that which we discovered over the last many months can solve adaptive problems and help us re-envision Jewish education.



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# Change is Good, Unless it Isn't

Daniel Alter

Imagine an elevator pitch from a company looking to differentiate itself five years from now:

"Hire us for a competitive edge and benefit from our revolutionary approach. Our organization believes that a face-to-face, in-person relationship will give you a qualitative advantage over all our competitors. We offer an in-person, personal touch. Not just a face on a screen."

This theoretical elevator pitch would have been nonsensical just over a year ago. After all, isn't that the way most of us conducted our business? Today, however, listening to pundits confidently forecast how business will change dramatically as a result of the pandemic, one can imagine a future where this elevator pitch makes sense. We hear the predictions: There is no need for office space anymore. People can work at home. Virtual meetings and home offices will save hundreds of hours of unnecessary commute time and thousands of dollars in office rental fees.

The recent pandemic has forced us to rethink how we live, how we work, and what we value. I have no doubt that our shared experiences over the past year will lead to significant changes in our lives. I am skeptical, however, of the certitude with which these pundits are able to describe exactly what those changes will look like and more importantly, what they should look like. We must consider the many consequences, especially the unforeseen negative consequences that could arise from some of these anticipated changes. I offer a few examples:

My board members have loved holding board meetings virtually. It is easy to just turn on a screen and join a meeting. If you are not done with dinner, you can finish eating while the meeting is being conducted. (We did have snacks at our in-person meetings, but they can't compare to a stocked fridge and home cooked meal.) Additionally, a higher percentage of our board members participated in these virtual meetings. This uptick is likely a product of both the convenience of virtual meetings, as well the curtailing, due to COVID concerns, of other activities competing for a board member's time.

Should we make virtual board meetings a permanent update? I think this would be a mistake.



**Daniel Alter** is the Head of School of the Moriah School in Englewood New Jersey. Rabbi Alter was formerly the founding Rabbi of the DAT Minyan in Denver, Colorado, and the Head of School of Denver Academy of Torah where he founded a new high school as an extension of the existing lower school.

For one, I miss the social and bonding aspect of our board meetings. Conversations before and after board meetings strengthened the social bonds among the various members. These board members were chosen, among other reasons, to represent various school constituencies. Natural bonds were created among diverse and different groups, thereby strengthening the fabric of our school community.

I also miss the *minyan* for *Maariv* that took place immediately following every board meeting; a reminder of our religious mission as a Jewish day school.

Additionally, we have noted less active participation in virtual meetings than during in-person meetings. As advanced as the technology is, people seem more hesitant to raise their voices in virtual meetings. The back-and-forth flow of conversation that occurs naturally during an in-person discussion seems to be harder to navigate on Zoom. The discussions and debates that used to occur in board meetings are not as robust, intense, or animated as they used to be. Without these passionate exchanges and debates that helped refine past decisions, I worry that the conclusions of board level discussions will be poorer.

And finally, I worry about the tendency that many of us have to multitask while on virtual meetings at home. A number of months ago, I tested an instinct by not shutting down our virtual meeting once it had ended. Most of the participants ended their meeting and went on with their night. Two participants who had turned their screens off for the meeting (a common occurrence in online events) remained on the screen. It was clear that they had kept their screen on but were not even there to realize that the meeting had ended.

While we could easily solve this by asking all board members to keep their cameras on, the story does highlight this tendency to attempt to multitask or merely focus on other things while on a Zoom call.

Similar arguments apply to other school functions that have been conducted online. Many of our parents loved the convenience of parent-teacher conferences online. They were able to speak to teachers from the comfort of their home, or if necessary, to speak to them from a car in between other Sunday errands.

But at what cost? What will the relationship between a teacher and parents look like when personal interactions are less frequent. The trust that is built between teachers and the home is critical to the educational experience, especially at those times when challenges arise. Without those face-to-face interactions, I worry that the teacher-parent partnership will suffer.

I fear the loss of parent relationships, not just with the teachers, but also with the physical environment. Our school is more than just a building. It is an educational habitat, shaped deliberately as a warm, conducive, and dynamic second home for our students and faculty. We invite all stakeholders, including parents, to participate in experiencing this second home and to shape relationships with the location where their children will learn, grow, and develop. We see this as an important element of our partnership with parents. I am saddened that over forty new families who joined our school last year have not been able to enter our building. I look forward to the time when all our parents will be allowed back into our building, developing in-person relationships with our faculty, with other parents, and with the wider community and school environment. I worry that curtailing

opportunities to interact in our building will have a negative impact.

The primary area of school life where we anticipate major changes is in the role of online learning. Our teachers spent extensive time this past year undergoing intensive training in online teaching. The results have been extraordinarily positive. Even at the most constricting stage of this pandemic, learning continued and subsequent assessments demonstrated that our students are on target to reach all grade level goals in skill-based areas such as math, reading, and limudei kodesh. I regularly hear excited voices describing the endless possibilities that online learning now holds. While online learning has existed for some time now, the copious amount of teacher training and exposure to this medium may be the catalyst that allows for all types of new usages. Students who are absent for the day can Zoom in, snow days need no longer exist, and a student can even participate in class while on the way to a dentist appointment. Most importantly, we can now imagine a future where a child who needs to be absent from school due to a serious illness has a lifeline into our world through virtual learning.

I would advise moving forward with caution here as well.

Under challenging circumstances our students thrived online. But facing a choice between in-person learning and online learning, do we really prefer to be online? We now have the experience to compile a list of the challenges with online learning and the questions that must be asked before this mode becomes an ideal in any form.

While technology is now naturally embedded into our educational approach in so many ways, most teachers can manage a

technology glitch when students are in school. They can always pivot to paper and pencil if necessary. When students are not in school however, a technology glitch, whether on the side of the school or the student at home, can become debilitating.

Additionally, the success of our teachers this past year was due to significant professional development, creating a comfort level among our teachers with the technology and even more importantly, the pedagogy of online learning. When we return fully to physical school, will we have the time and funds to continue keeping our teachers up to date and fresh when using technology? Without regular practice, will teachers be able to promptly pivot back to online learning? Even if they can, will the anxiety created over this change of routine be worth the benefit?

We have also learned over the past year that teaching to a class where some students are in person and others are on Zoom is quite difficult, and impacts negatively on the students who are in class. Ensuring that students online are set up for learning, focused, and engaged requires significant attention and effort and takes away precious classroom time from other students. What impact will cameras in each classroom and regular opportunities for students to Zoom in for all sorts of reasons have on the students in the classroom?

Finally, I fear negative social impact on students who use online learning. We saw that some students fared more poorly while using remote learning than others. That issue can be addressed. I am more worried about a different phenomenon: students whose parents think that they fared better while being online. I believe that many of them are mistaken. A student who struggles with

social interactions will often prefer to sit at home on a computer where they do not need to worry about the challenges of interacting with peers. This avoidance, while comfortable in the moment, removes the necessity to learn to interact with others and can stunt his or her growth and ability to be a functional member of society, which is another one of the many learning opportunities that a school provides. A student who seems to be better behaved while online is often simply focused on other distractions. An online class may be easier to manage, but students may not be learning and don't have the opportunity to learn how to behave in a classroom environment. These missed opportunities simply "kick the can down the road," leading to more challenging situations in the future.

I don't believe that all technology and all change is bad. On the contrary, our school has embraced many new educational tools; some of those involving technology and some on the cutting edge of pedagogy. We will continue to embrace new tools, while working to understand what we can learn from our experiences over the past year. My warning, however, is that we need to make these changes thoughtfully and deliberately, keeping in mind all the short-term and long-term challenges and ensuring we have solutions to these challenges. For those who are convinced that we are there, I would argue that the road ahead of us is still very long.



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# Does Voluntary Zoom-ing Play a Role in the Schools of the Future?

Yaakov Jaffe



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Like any new invention or technology used in school, Zoom has enormous benefits, but also has unanticipated downsides. It enables students to stay current in their courses from anywhere in the globe, avoiding disruptions and missed classes. At the same time, both teacher instruction and student learning face challenges when done over Zoom, where students are often preoccupied by other apps on their phones and computers and distracted by whatever else may be going on in the location they are Zooming from. There are also social costs, mental health costs, and fewer serendipitous hallway student/teacher interactions when students learn remotely.

In a year of unprecedented disruptions and major health justifications for Zooming, this medium proved to be a necessity, outweighing the costs to learning. But what about in future years when Zooming is voluntary and optional? Where do we distinguish between opportunities to employ Zoom as a vital technology, or to discourage its use as a reinforcer for unhealthy behavior?

Consider the following range of Zoom scenarios, from the most necessary to the most detrimental:

- A student who is auto-immune compromised learning over Zoom to remain safe during a pandemic.
- A student who returned home after travel to a family Bar Mitzvah and must quarantine for a

week until state travel guidelines enable the student to return to school.

- A student who is quarantining at home in advance of traveling to visit an elderly great-grandparent, who does not want to miss school while preparing for the trip.
- A student attending a family wedding in Florida who doesn't wish to miss class, and so Zooms into the classroom each morning on the days before and after the wedding.
- A student whose family found more affordable airline tickets to leave for winter break a few days early, and so finishes the fall semester from vacation with two days of school on Zoom.
- A student with an orthodontist appointment at 11am who cannot get a ride from school to the appointment who attends two morning classes on Zoom before the appointment and from the car on the way to the appointment.
- A student who leaves school early with siblings at 2pm dismissal because the family can't find a ride to bring the student home at 6pm dismissal, who finishes the day on Zoom.
- A student who sleeps late and misses the bus and so just decides to Zoom for the day.
- A student with three free periods in the middle of the day, so goes home to play video games and then finishes his last two classes on Zoom.
- A student who has a job as a cashier in a store or restaurant who Zooms into class while working behind the counter.

You can imagine the challenge facing school educators as you read the list from one end to the other, struggling about where

to draw the line as to whether the student described should be encouraged, permitted, tolerated, or forbidden to join school by Zoom. On the one hand, no one would ever want to deprive a child from an opportunity to learn. But on the other hand, part of being a positive force in the life of young people includes also dissuading them from behaviors that might appear to the teenager (or middle schooler) as positive but which we know are not to their own benefit. Some circumstances certainly warrant Zoom, while others do not.

In our internal conversations about elective Zooming, we have turned to three separate questions which help guide us in determining which forms of elective Zooming should be part of our future plans and which should not.

### **1 - In the short term, will Zooming increase this student's learning and growth?**

Not surprisingly, the answer to this question is usually yes. A student almost always will learn and grow more by participating in class remotely, as opposed to not participating at all. But sometimes, the answer is no, as the stress of feeling obligated to attend a full day of classes over Zoom can be too significant to juggle in the context of the student's other personal obligations.

### **2 - In the long term, did offering Zoom serve as a driver of the justification or validation for the student to miss in-person class in the first place.**

Schools should frame this question not as a binary one (should the student attend on Zoom or not attend at all), but as a trilateral one. If attending over Zoom was not an option, would the student attend in person or not

attend at all? Does the very option of Zoom encourage students to pursue an option they don't realize is inferior, because they don't realize the costs of learning remotely? This question is likely answered differently for each student's own unique learning profile, and their stage of growth and development as a learner.

### 3 - How much value-add is provided for the Zooming student, and at what cost to the rest of the class?

Zooming places greater stress on the teacher's ability to manage the classroom and engage all students in the lesson, especially when unannounced. We know that students focus and attend to instruction better when in person, and educators have a full gamut of instructional and didactic techniques and strategies that cannot be used on Zoom, such as managing by walking around, use of manipulatives, coordination of whiteboard/smartboard, and learning cues scattered

around a classroom. Does the marginal added value to the student making it to one extra class while on route to the orthodontist justify the distraction to teachers and students? A possible compromise for next year may involve Zooming students "listening in" on Zoom without asking questions and with their cameras off to minimize distractions to other students and with a smaller burden on the teacher, instead of being an active presence in the classroom.

Many are asking which innovations of the COVID pandemic are here to stay, and Zoom schooling appears to be one of them. We expect that teachers or students who might have broken legs or arms or who are home recovering from surgery will use this technology to continue learning in circumstances when in the past there would be little learning done. However, Jewish educators must give guidance to students, parents, and communities to determine when the use of this technology is beneficial and when it merely provides the illusion of achieving its goals.



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# No Water, No Life

Rivy Poupko Kletenik

Watching our sixth graders perform on Lag Ba'Omer was a particularly poignant, multilayered moment. This was not your typical grade school performance. This year it was a milestone, our largest gathering of students at an assembly. It was a sight. The masked performers—yes, a further hinderance to audibility—looked out at their masked, socially distanced audience, sitting a luxurious three feet apart. They emoted as best they could.

The actors are bringing to life the story of Rabbi Akiva and the well-known Aesop-like fable of the fox and fish. The student dramatically declares, “Just as the fish cannot exist outside of the water so too, we cannot live without Torah.” Its meaning is newly compounded by our real life COVID school year. Its message hits home.

Little does the student-actor know to what degree this classic *agada* has been animating her school-leaders. When the pandemic’s harsh realities began to unfold and as our schools ventured into the uncharted waters of Spring 2020, my mind swirled as if on a twenty-four-hour loop with teachings deeply ingrained since childhood.

The wisdom of sages became newly prescient and pertinent, their voices pinging like the pulsating pinball machines that were tucked in the corner of the lobby of the Jewish hotel in the Catskills of my childhood. The metal ball is released first hitting Rabbi Akiva’s, “no water, no life” light after which the spirited sphere ricochets quickly to Yehudah Maccabee’s “children must be taught Torah.” From there it bounces with a lightening-like clamor over to Resh Lakish’s “it is the breath of young-ones learning that sustains the world,” and speedily catapults to Mordekhai’s “children must gather to pray, or we shall have no hope.” After a zig zag loop with a shrill finale complete with a triple bing-bing-bing and flashing lights it hits “any town without a Jewish school is likely to be destroyed.”

I am sure that I am not alone. We all had our compelling motivations: mental wellbeing of our students, fear of backsliding in academic achievement, determination to relieve the burden that distance learning was placing on homelife, the desire to offer what public schools are unable to make happen and, finally, let us be honest, the reality that we must keep our institutions solvent. For me, it is the steady loop of these familiar teachings that are animating my every waking hour. This crisis is our test in the long-storied trajectory; will Torah prevail? We are determined; we must open school for in-



**Rivy Poupko Kletenik** is in her fifteenth year as Head of School of the Seattle Hebrew Academy.

person learning. We have no choice. We must make this happen, whatever it takes. This is our moment. We are now on one of those historical precipices.

I gently remind the community over Zoom, “You know even in the Warsaw Ghetto there were schools.” Drop the microphone. After a moment of reflection: reality check. I am aware that though we are going through something unprecedented, comparisons to Holocaust are, note-to-self, extreme and over the top. We move forward with the plan to re-open September 1 for in-person school, five days a week for all grades, Early Childhood through Middle School.

The summer brings superhuman efforts to ready the campus and multiple Zoom meetings with parents and teachers to talk things through. A Health Team is put in place as are rigorous daily protocols. The Samis Foundation openheartedly funds our PPE needs along with tech upgrades and assistance with resources to set up outdoors spaces for classes.

The “Hillel Pledge,” a riff on “If I am not for myself, who will be for me and when I am only for myself, how am I?” is created to ensure that we all feel the gravity of the moment. It is of the utmost importance that we all honor COVID protocols to ensure a successful return to school. Education must take precedence over travel, fun, and socializing if this return is to be accomplished safely.

It is now the first week of school. I am touring our newly created outdoor campus with a reporter from the Seattle Times. She pushes me, presses—why, why did you go to such lengths to make this happen? 93 canopies, outdoor classrooms, prayer areas, three honey bucket portable washing stations, iPads, tripods, extra assistants, an additional

armed guard, new arrival and dismissal procedures, health screening apps, portable microphones, the list goes on and on. Why, she asked, didn’t you just simply go online or remote as did most schools? I spoke of student-wellbeing, of science, and of societal priorities. She pushed, why not wait it out like most other schools?

The conversation turned a bit raw. I paused, took a breath and went there.

“I would not be alive or standing here with you in the Pacific Northwest if it had not been for a dramatic devotion to Jewish study and a belief that if there is no school for learning, there is no life.” She looked at me and I shared the story that my siblings and I were raised on.

In Stalin’s Russia there are no Jewish schools. My grandfather, Chief Rabbi of Velizh, together with my grandmother, decide that their three oldest sons—aged nine to thirteen—must be smuggled out of the USSR across the border to Poland, to study in the yeshiva of the Hafetz Hayim, despite the danger and expense and the painful separation from their children. “This we do for Torah,” was the trope I heard again and again. That decision ultimately saved the family—not just from Stalin but from the fate which befell the Jews of Velizh in the winter of 1941-1942.

It was a bit intense for that sunny fall day, but she got the picture.

“If there is no water, there is no life.”

Learning Lab

# A Post-COVID Dream

Yerachmiel Garfield

The COVID pandemic brought the potential of irreparable divisiveness to our school communities. We were forced to grapple with core issues such as *sakanat nefashot*, danger to life, *hillul Hashem* (disgracing God's name), and *bitul Torah*, squandering time allocated for Torah learning. These values, foundational to our religious personas and the ethos of our school, often seemed to conflict. There was a heightened level of intensity and passion marking any decision that touched on these topics. Additionally, since so little was known about COVID, it was difficult to fully assess the risk, impact, and need for protective practices. All of these elements created a perfect storm for long-lasting discord in our communities.

Schools could not debate these issues theoretically; they had to choose how to manage this contentious reality. And while other community institutions faced similar predicaments, schools evoked added emotion. Parents were passionate about protecting their children, and schools have legal requirements mandating attendance while absence from communal events or the daily *minyan* can be more easily excused.

In our school, we recognized the threat to community *shalom* as a primary concern when making COVID related decisions; we did not want COVID to permanently destroy community cohesion. Prioritizing respect for parents and staff with opposing views, some of the specific “*shalom* conscious” actions we took were:

1. All community institutional leaders issued joint communications to families.
2. School and shul leadership used public addresses to discuss *shalom* and the importance of respecting alternate views, while promoting opportunities to foster community.
3. Parents received regular and direct COVID communications via brief weekly video updates.
4. There was full transparency within the bounds of HIPAA about all COVID cases—sharing information, relevant policies, and our action plans as quickly as possible.
5. A COVID Nurse, a new position, was hired and directly answered all parental COVID related questions. This shielded school administrators from the frustrating decisions that come with a COVID positive case in the family.



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6. We made efforts to be as flexible as possible within the framework of our core medical guidance.
7. We tried to accommodate opposing views whenever possible and to avoid drawing lines in the sand that would not allow for appropriate individual flexibility whenever feasible.
8. Our school did not accept derogatory reports about other people regarding policy violations.

The response of our parent body to this approach has been inspiring. I have had many respectful conversations with parents on all sides of the COVID debates, and those conversations have resulted in strengthened relationships. Despite some disagreements and a few parents who expressed disappointment, we have not allowed COVID to destroy our community culture because we consciously chose *shalom* as a primary value as we made decisions daily.

As we plan for the future, I ask if we can maintain our focus on *shalom* as future issues arise. If we were able to weather this most severe COVID storm with *shalom* as a guiding principle, it gives me hope that we can maintain that value moving forward.

Navigating these challenges mindfully has taught me how to lead while not allowing policy disagreements to morph into personal attacks. There will always be differing opinions in a school community. It is important to remember that the opposing view is not trying to hurt others, rather, it is based in a widely held belief about a complex topic—even if I personally question those conclusions.

Perhaps the path forward can include prioritizing *shalom* and a refusal to allow vilifications to find a place in community discourse. We can strive to communicate

transparently and consistently, to be flexible when possible, and to attempt to validate all voices. In this way, our COVID response can serve as a model for school community cultures in the future.



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# Building Students' Self-Awareness Skills: A Systems Thinking Approach to Trauma-Sensitive Education

Ian Cohen

Embracing the notion that everyone has experienced trauma during the pandemic leads to the acceptance that all schools require a trauma-informed education approach now and for the years to come. Like all educational institutions, Jewish day schools must be equipped with the tools and resources to support the vast and pervasive emotional distress that has resulted from the range of trauma that our children and adolescents have experienced. At a time of collective trauma, students—more than ever before—need to be given a voice to express themselves, and to know that they will have someone who will deeply listen to and support them. They need to feel and observe that their school as a whole is embracing, encouraging, teaching, and modeling self-awareness.

In her book [\*The Choice: Embrace the Possible\*](#), Dr. Edith Eger, world renowned trauma specialist and Holocaust survivor, often used the phrase 'depression is the opposite of expression' when reflecting on how she has helped her patients, and herself, work through trauma. This phrase reflects the vital role that active expression of thoughts and feelings plays in the healing process after experiencing trauma. When children and adolescents are able to express themselves,



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they are able to start walking the path toward resilience. When students have the language, tools, and space to accurately and honestly express their emotions and ideas, their teachers and other caring adults in their lives will then have the information they need to be emphatic, supportive, and collaborative helpers and caregivers.

Knowing that self-expression would be vital to the re-entry process this past fall, we, at Luria Academy, needed to figure out how best to create the conditions on the ground that would promote the importance of student voice. We asked ourselves what learning experiences students need in order to develop the tools to understand their emotions and thoughts. Furthermore, we challenged ourselves to deeply understand what skills students must have to accurately describe those emotions and thoughts so they can either identify a coping strategy themselves or articulate to an adult how they feel and what they need. To us, the answers to these questions lay in further developing self-awareness skills, a core competency from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, Emotional Learning's (CASEL) model for social and emotional learning (SEL).

### What is Self-Awareness?

Self-awareness, as defined by CASEL, is the ability to understand and articulate one's emotions, thoughts, and aspects of their identity. Specific self-awareness skills include developing emotional identification tools, self-efficacy, self-confidence, a growth mindset, and an understanding of personal interests and strengths. To become self-aware, students not only need to develop tools for understanding these concepts, but they also have to develop the language to

express this self-knowledge to others and be able to articulate how their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are affecting them and others in different situations and contexts. Through the maturation of these skills, students can gain an understanding of their feelings so they can deal with them independently in a healthy manner or advocate for the type of support they need.

### A Systems Thinking Framework

We knew that our response to trauma had to start with a journey through self-awareness discovery. But with all the other competing work demands (e.g., new safety procedures and protocols) being placed on school staff and administrators, the idea of any of us carrying the burden of teaching these skills seemed like an incredibly heavy lift. As Luria's school psychologist, I personally wondered how I would be able to address all the social and emotional concerns of students during this coming year. How would I be able to anticipate respond to, and support all the unpredictable, and even at times scary, situations that were going to occur? For teachers, I wondered the same. How were they going to be responsible for teaching self-awareness skills in their classrooms and hold space for their students' emotional needs while dealing with all the other challenges in their lives and in their communities? What became quickly apparent to me as we started solidifying our re-entry plans over the summer was that no one could do this alone. We needed to have an inclusive trauma-informed re-entry plan that involved everyone; we needed a systems thinking approach.

A systems thinking approach recognizes that all aspects of school, all the component parts of its system, need to work towards the

goal of fostering stronger self-awareness skills. In that respect, self-awareness skills need to be taught to students and also be infused across all levels of the Jewish day school system—school leadership, faculty and staff, students, families, school-wide programs, and all curricular areas.

### Self-Awareness Across the System

- **Self-Awareness Learning for Students:** Students need to engage in direct and continual learning to develop self-awareness skills. We dedicated lessons throughout this year on self-awareness topics such as emotional identification, growth mindset, and recognizing strengths. Self-awareness skills were adapted to meet the developmental needs of preschool, elementary, and middle school students. In order to build tools for the expression of feelings and thoughts, we adopted the [RULER](#) (Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing, Regulating) program this year, a comprehensive SEL program developed by the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. As part of the RULER program, students learn to use the Mood Meter to recognize and label their emotions. As a psychologist, this tool was invaluable to me this year as it allowed me to provide students with an easy tool to use to express themselves.

- **School Leadership:** We thought it was essential that our leadership model self-awareness skills in order to create authentic environments where honest expression is encouraged and valued. Despite logistical challenges, the leadership continued their monthly meetings that covered topics such as navigating challenging conversations, becoming strong and collaborative teammates, and learning how to balance our

needs with the needs of others. The leadership team was introduced to new texts to read on their own time, which centered on building their own self-awareness. Through its own SEL learning, the leadership team was able to infuse and model these skills throughout the system when giving feedback to staff, having check-ins, running team meetings, and collaborating with key stakeholders and community members.

- **Teachers and Support Staff:** It is critical for Jewish day schools to devote time and energy to engage their teachers and support staff in their own development of self-awareness skills. Learning these skills allows educators to be able to effectively and authentically impart these skills to their students. These tools also prepare them to work with their colleagues. At Luria, all faculty read Ross Greene's [Lost at School](#) as a way to engage in a dialogue about behavioral approaches that emphasize listening to students and valuing the importance of empathy in collaboration. In addition, they practiced RULER skills for themselves as a faculty before introducing it to students.

- **Integration Across Judaic and General Studies:** CASEL's framework for SEL has taught us that students need to learn SEL skills in multiple ways and in diverse contexts. A trauma-informed education approach needs to have no boundaries in curriculum or content areas. Given the diversity of subjects taught in Jewish schools, these environments are the perfect places to grow and practice self-awareness skills. To do this, we encouraged our staff and students to bring these skills to other contexts such as discussing whether a character in a story had a growth mindset during a language arts lesson or reflecting on a similar question in their *Humash* learning.

Furthermore, we asked students to connect their newfound emotional identification tools to how they experience holiday learning and any community celebrations. For instance, during the days leading up to Purim we used the Mood Meter to reflect on what helps us experience joy and what we need to do to help others experience that emotion.

- **Learning for Families:** Opportunities for families to share in the SEL work is vital for the success of any SEL program. Jewish day schools need to share the self-awareness resources and tools that their children have received at school with the parent body. Hearing the same language at home and at school can be very powerful. This year, we held a book club for parents on self-awareness and we shared SEL updates and tools in our weekly newsletters.

- **Across Multiple Languages:** If we want students to express themselves, then we need to have the right words to accurately label their feelings in all the languages in which they are taught. Given that students in a Jewish day school need to shift into Hebrew learning environments, they also need to know how to use their self-awareness tools in that language. SEL curriculum materials need to be adapted to incorporate terms from different languages so student emotional vocabulary is robust, no matter what language is being used in their classrooms.

### Building for the Future

The other day, I walked into a middle school math room with a large Mood Meter poster hanging on a wall in the background, and the math teacher and I talked about how we have both seen a lot of our middle school students become more confident in their math skills. Through an exploration this year of the

emotions that they experienced during math, some of our middle school students started to become more comfortable with the subject and began taking risks in class for the first time.

This change in math mindset was not something we specifically designed; when we developed our re-entry plans this past summer, we did not target math self-confidence as one of our goals. But what we learned was that creating a dialogue about the importance of self-awareness empowered our teachers to bring that frame to their classrooms and created the safe space for our children to become more resilient in ways that we could not have possibly imagined or controlled. The math resilience happened organically and collaboratively between a teacher and her students as a result of the school-wide system we had created.

COVID-19 has forced all organizations to re-examine and strengthen their own systems to ensure that they are meeting the needs of those whom the organization serves. To us at Luria Academy, protecting the well-being of students meant adopting a trauma sensitive approach that places self-awareness at the center. It also meant giving all stakeholders in the system the tools, permission, and autonomy to foster social and emotional skills in their own unique way.

Focusing on the critical, core SEL skill of self-awareness gave students the tools to share their experiences and advocate for their needs. It also provided educators the information they need to be helpful and supportive listeners, while simultaneously giving the adults more tools to cope with the trauma they have experienced in their own lives. As a psychologist and a member of Luria's leadership, I learned that no one

can do this alone, and that all future social emotional initiatives need to be inclusive of every member of the school's learning community. With a systems thinking approach to trauma-informed education, the whole school, including all its parts, was able to work together to create positive and supportive environments that teach, support, and encourage self-awareness.



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# The Urgency of Teaching for Uncertainty: Opportunities and Challenges for Jewish Educators

Howard Dietcher



## Uncertainty and COVID-19

One of the most certain features of the COVID-19 period is the unprecedented level of uncertainty in our lives. Uncertainty is all around us, as the COVID-19 pandemic has heightened uncertainty over our physical and mental health, the economy, relationships, education, employment, and finances. As human beings, we crave a sense of security. We want to feel safe and maintain a sense of control over our lives. Uncertainty leaves us feeling diminished, stressed, anxious, and powerless. Uncertainty drains us and traps us in a downward spiral of endless “what-ifs” and worst-case scenarios.

Well before the current pandemic, it was clear that while we may not wish to acknowledge it, uncertainty is a natural and unavoidable part of life. On some level, we know that very little about our lives is constant or totally certain, and while we have control over many things, we can’t control everything that happens to us. The coronavirus outbreak has emphasized that life can change quickly and unpredictably. The COVID-19 pandemic is changing—or has already changed—our collective computation of uncertainty in ways that we could not have imagined a year ago. The need to educate students about constructive ways to embrace uncertainty will definitely extend beyond the current pandemic, and will increasingly

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become a key educational goal in the coming years.

### Challenges for Classroom Teachers

Like most people, teachers do not like the messy nature of uncertainty—it is confusing, intimidating, and often overwhelming. Additionally, teachers face unique questions when addressing uncertainty within the classroom setting. For example:

- Will exploring issues of uncertainty undermine students' confidence and thereby stymie their cognitive development?
- Do students have the knowledge, skills, and confidence to deal with the “grey areas” of uncertainty and doubt?
- How will optimizing for uncertainty influence students' ability to succeed in standardized tests that include singular responses?
- If we, as students, were never educated to confront uncertainty constructively and we were never taught to broach uncertainty boldly and directly, how then, as teachers, can we shift to a teaching style based on embracing uncertainty?

Given these challenges, we might deliberately or inadvertently try to eliminate all uncertainty, instead of embracing it in a constructive fashion.

### Why Should Teachers Bother with Uncertainty?

Why should we leave the comfort of our set curricula and classroom protocols to introduce something as unpredictable as uncertainty?

Uncertainty fills a critical role in growth and

development. Being forced out of routine can be positive and rewarding for both students and teachers. One of the biggest obstacles for teacher growth is stagnation; empowering teachers to take risks and swim in uncharted waters is essential for dynamic teaching. Without change, classrooms become dull and stagnant as the teachers become bored of their own teaching. Breaking the routine is an opportunity for re-evaluation, renewal, change, and growth.

Furthermore, critical ingredients for creative teaching include revisiting accepted assumptions, exploring new educational pathways, and acquiring new knowledge. Embracing uncertainty encourages teachers to seek new ideas and directions. This propels them to become active learners who model embracing uncertainty for their students.

### The Benefits of Uncertainty for Student Growth

Despite the challenges, introducing a measured degree of uncertainty into the classroom can be beneficial for students. For example, dealing with uncertainty fosters students' creativity, independent thought, decision making, and scientific inquiry. Students need to learn to be comfortable being wrong; articulating a theory and then testing it. A critical learning experience will include the ability to make mistakes, accept the positive implications of uncertainty, and examine other possibilities.

Wrestling with the uncertainty of a knotty challenge encourages students to invest time and energy in order to unpack the problem, analyze its various elements, generate creative solutions, and evaluate their impact. When there are no pat answers, students have the priceless opportunity to think for themselves.

Jean Piaget, the towering Swiss psychologist, discusses the role of cognitive disequilibrium as a critical stage in the learning process. Piaget underscores the educational value of a child's internal conflicts caused by the clash of current beliefs and new information. This disequilibrium is unsettling, yet it generates new pathways to resolve tension and eventually reach a conclusion that has been carefully weighed. Being confronted with the uncertainty of determining what is true thus leads to a rigorous learning experience.

Additionally, the ability to deal with uncertainty is often regarded as a premise for sustainable development. For instance, in the field of science, uncertainty is considered an intrinsic component of scientific inquiry which highlights the need for additional research. In this world, it is seldom possible to know enough to declare something as certain, and from a young age, budding scientists are taught to search for the uncertain, to study and analyze it, and then to include this knowledge in their ongoing work.

Teaching students to deal with uncertainty helps prepare them to deal with life. Not everything has an easy answer. Teaching students to think independently is the best way to prepare them to deal with the myriad decisions and challenges that they are bound to encounter in the future. Uncertainty in the classroom can thus be a valuable tool in teaching many critical skills for lifelong learning, personal development, and emotional wellbeing.

### Uncertainty in the Classroom: Getting it Right

One of the great challenges regarding uncertainty is finding an appropriate balance between uncertainty and a sense of security.

Eliminating all uncertainty is tempting for teachers who worry that students cannot effectively deal with "grey answers" that trigger doubts and questions, or teachers who are concerned that acknowledging uncertainty may undermine their position and authority. These teachers overlook a growing body of research that suggests that children are capable of far more sophisticated mental processing than was previously assumed, and that doing so empowers the students and provides them with the skills to become lifelong learners.

On the other end of the spectrum are the teachers who do not offer students the necessary structures and support systems to help them deal with uncertainty. This could result in learning paralysis, in which ambiguity overload cripples the learning process as students struggle to even begin to navigate the complexities presented to them.

A constructive approach provides students with the requisite knowledge, skills, and confidence to navigate these unknown waters. In carefully constructed ways, taking into account factors such as the age, emotional development, and cultural contexts of the students, the teacher introduces an element of uncertainty which the students have the skills to tackle. When approached in an atmosphere of constructive uncertainty, challenges become enormously valuable as they invite young learners to think in critical ways.

Preparing students to wrestle with the complexities of uncertainty requires developing "uncertainty competencies" that include a specific set of skills, knowledge, attitudes, and abilities. Engaging students in decision-making processes is an effective way to acquire these competencies. Responsible

and productive decision making begins with an element of uncertainty, followed by a process in which various options are weighed and a final decision is made.

We suggest creating study units that focus on a range of critical decisions made throughout Jewish history. This can either take the form of a specific study unit on “Exploring the Role of Uncertainty in Challenging Decision Making in Jewish Life.” Alternatively, this topic can be integrated into existing study units. Both approaches share a common goal of providing students with the necessary skills, knowledge, and confidence that are essential for effective decision making. Educators can use both approaches in the same classroom, integrating these skills into a range of diverse learning experiences.

In presenting these case studies to students, we need to attend to the following issues:

- Have we provided sufficient background and contextual information?
- Is the provided information too complex or ambiguous?
- What is the reliability of the information?
- What is the level of personal relevance for the student?

Obviously, the level of appropriate ambiguity will vary based on the age and developmental stage of the students.

### Practical Examples

An abundance of critical decisions have shaped Jewish history. Jewish leaders have faced momentous challenges of historic consequence that were ridden with risk, uncertainty, and doubt. Examples of pivotal decisions that transformed Jewish history

include:

- The Israelites decision to jump into the Sea of Reeds as the Egyptian army approached. (*Exodus* 14)
- Queen Esther’s critical decision to defy the official protocol and approach King Achashverosh in order to save the Jews in the Persian Empire. (*Esther* 4:16)
- Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai’s decision to escape Jerusalem and approach the Roman emperor Vespasian for permission to establish a new center of Jewish learning in Yavne. (*Gittin* 56a)
- David ben Gurion’s decision to attack the Irgun forces in the famous Altalena Affair in June 1948

To encourage students to probe all facets of the knotty challenges at stake, we suggest the following questions:

- What were the historical, social, political, and religious contexts in which these decisions were made?
- What do we know about the deliberative process that was adopted in making this decision?
- What do we know about the backgrounds of the decision makers that bears relevance for the ensuing process?
- What underlying values guided their decisions?
- What alternate paths could have been taken?
- With historical hindsight, how are these decisions judged and evaluated?

Revisiting these historical choices is a most effective and productive way for students to experience constructive uncertainty. They

can appreciate all the benefits of exploring important decisions from the safety of a historical remove and the comfort of their familiar classrooms. Additionally, students can be encouraged to undertake educational projects that focus attention on the extraordinary sense of responsibility that these leaders assumed when deciding on the best course of action.

### Conclusion

Our current challenge is to live with uncertainty. The time is ripe to openly explore issues of uncertainty in Jewish education.

One of the most profound and influential pedagogues in Jewish history is Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, the eleventh century French commentator known by the acronym Rashi. Regarding *Genesis* 28:5, Rashi comments: "I do not know what this teaches us." Rashi could have simply skipped commenting on this verse, yet he deliberately chose to teach us the value of uncertainty.

What a powerful message for our times: We cannot escape uncertainty. We must eagerly embrace it.



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# COVID-Inspired Mishpachot

Maury Grebenau and Sara Block

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In June of 2020, our high school Judaic team met to discuss programming for the coming year. We had just experienced a few months of Zoom-only classes and programming with mixed results. We needed to plan programming that would be COVID-safe in person yet also work on Zoom since we didn't know what the year would look like.

## Planning for Programming

Our goals for programming for the 2020-2021 year were to increase community and socialization between students in an abnormal year during which these critical aspects of school might not otherwise occur organically. We also wanted to develop programming that we would be proud of in any year, not simply a suboptimal fix like broadcasting programming into multiple rooms. That model wasn't engaging enough, and it lacked the community building we felt was necessary. After a lot of discussion, we began to sketch out the *Mishpachot* program that we have run this year that will be described in this article.

### Structure of the *Mishpachot* Program

The Judaic faculty selected eight student leaders who were passionate about our school community to plan and run programs. This student board established mini communities, *mishpachot*, as the model for Judaic programming. Each *mishpacha* had twelve students, three per grade, including a board member to lead the family. The *mishpachot* were designed in this way to help foster the strong cross-grade friendships that were a defining feature of our high school, especially in light of COVID podding which meant less interaction between grades. We frequently say that we are small enough for there “not to be a back row,” meaning every student is engaged in the classroom. The *mishpacha* model brought this feeling to our programming.

### In Practice

Our first Judaic program was on Zoom and completely student led. The student board introduced the *Mishpacha* program, and students were then divided into *mishpachot* for an icebreaker activity. Students who were usually disengaged with their cameras off were now interacting with their new “family.” It was a reassuring and uplifting scene for students who were missing the social and communal elements of high school.

A months-long video competition where each *mishpacha* produced a video about school/Jewish pride brought each *mishpacha* together and became a highlight of the year. The final videos were shown during our Purim celebration, boosting attendance and engagement as each student waited to show what their *mishpacha* had created.

During parts of the year when we had some students in person and others on

Zoom, we continued to plan programs using the *mishpacha* structure. For example, in preparation for Yom Kippur, students discussed Desean Jackson’s public apology in relation to the Rambam’s guidelines of teshuva. In another program, Doron Kornbluth addressed all students via Zoom, followed by student discussions with their *mishpachot* about the importance of marrying a Jewish partner. With each program, the student leaders chose the topic, crafted the program, and led the conversations with their peers.

The student leadership changed the energy of the program from passively hearing from a teacher to actively engaging with friends. Because the programs were developed and led by their peers, students were interested and excited to participate. Moreover, the conversations were meaningful, and allowed for deep student connection, as illustrated by one of our students, “Our group truly became a family through those experiences and getting to know each other better. These bonds would not have been able to form through regular Judaic programming.”

### Conclusion

Three important themes emerged from the *Mishpachot* program that we believe were instrumental to its success. The first was the cultivation of student buy-in through the *mishpacha* structure. The other themes were community building and student engagement, which were both goals of the program and guiding principles in building it.

The *Mishpachot* program was not a panacea and when only some students were on Zoom it was a challenge to keep them engaged and included. However, overall, we found the program to be transformative in creating engagement and community

in Akiba-Yavneh during a year when these aspects were even more important than usual. By empowering our students to lead, we built their sense of agency while simultaneously creating higher engagement from all students as they joined their peers and learned from them. We found that strengthening mini-communities within our school had the effect of building an overall sense of community throughout the school. The *mishpachot* have left our students feeling excited about programming and looking forward to continuing their leadership next year, G-d willing with fewer restrictions.

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# The School as Part of the Village

Barbara Applebaum

As educators, we work hard to refine a sixth sense pertaining to our students' well-being: we hear their words, listen to their manner of speech, and track their body language. When a student walks into class and has their hoodie up, or puts their head on their desk, a sensitive teacher sees distress and reaches out. When remote learning began, reading our students from a distance became more complex. When a student didn't log on to a virtual class, didn't turn their camera on, or wasn't responding to email, how were we to find out what was happening? How did we make sure that the student was OK?

Over the last year, Hillel Day School of Metropolitan Detroit has methodically expanded our net of student accountability to encompass our social workers, teachers, learning specialists, staff, and leadership members, each gaining more expertise in recognizing students in crisis. In addition to our becoming detectives, there were constant lines of communication between the teachers, social workers, and school leadership, enabling us to connect families with outside support when needed. The leadership team began meeting daily to communicate any concerns and to stay connected. Teachers, social workers, and community directors were in constant communication with each other so we could know if an instance of a student having a camera off or seeming despondent was just a momentary blip in one class or more of a pattern emerging among many classes. The support team, comprised of the Director of Student Services, social workers, and community directors, began meeting virtually on a daily basis to review student needs and action plans, and to take care of each other.

Our teachers kept in touch with students after hours, met with them individually for socially distanced walks, and popped by in front yards just to smile and say hello to a student craving human interaction beyond the home. With time, the faculty and staff were becoming more skilled at being able to tell the difference between a bad day and a depressed preteen. We were able to distinguish between when a student chose to learn from their bed and when a student wasn't leaving their bed and detected issues including academic disengagement, mental and mood disorders, self-harm, job loss,



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food insecurity, and more. Addressing these issues ranged from simple phone calls to negotiating professional psychological help and contacting local donors to provide financial assistance to families in distress. The school was thus transformed from an educational institution to a critical piece of the local Jewish community's COVID response.

As we move forward it is clear that we have students and families who continue to struggle. Even more, it has become clear that the systems we put in place will continue to serve our students well in the post-COVID era. Our students are getting the support they need, they feel seen and heard by the adults in their lives, and their families know that we are here to help. The adage that it takes a village to raise a child has never been more true, and Hillel is proud to have become an essential component of that village.



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# Enabling Student Agency

Rachel Mohl Abrahams



**Rachel Mohl Abrahams** serves as the Senior Advisor for Education Grants and Programs at the Mayberg Foundation. Previously Rachel served as a Senior Program Officer at The AVI CHAI Foundation where she specialized in Jewish education grantmaking and day school initiatives. Rachel has been a champion for integrating personalized learning into Jewish education spaces.

Passover 2021 was approaching, as was another round of virtual learning for Jewish day schools. Even North American day schools meeting in person were scheduling online classes for some pre- and post-Passover days as a safety measure, allowing teachers and families to be with extended family for the first time in a year. Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School in Rockville, MD, aimed to maximize the virtual learning time and created an “innovation minimester” for their middle school. With a mix of synchronous sessions and blocks for independent work time, students selected and developed a project that explored a topic of their choice in a meaningful and substantive way. The self-selected project had four criteria: it had to benefit the student, their community, or the world; reflect Jewish values; stretch the student to strengthen skills and possibly develop new ones; and be innovative. The experience enabled students to envision and create a project that explored a topic in depth and implement a plan for learning which included articulating challenges and finding solutions. Perhaps most importantly, students were asked to reflect on their learning, evaluating strengths and areas for growth. The school plans to continue the innovation minimester even when there is no longer a need for virtual instruction: “This is just the beginning. Next year we hope to incorporate site visits and service-learning.”

Around the country, over the course of the last year, day school educators had the chance to expand or initiate learning that increased student independence. Whether students learned to use a learning management system for the first time, took a Jewish studies online course through Lookstein Virtual Jewish Academy or the Online Jewish Studies Courses at VHS Learning, or utilized self-paced playlists, remote and concurrent learning (where a class is comprised of in-person and at-home students) called for less frontal instruction and more autonomous student learning.

At the Ottawa Jewish Community School, remote learning was an opportunity to build self-directed learners. Older students were more likely to be able to engage, search for help online, and find ways to “figure a task out.” The younger the learners were, the more those skills needed to be developed. By creating class [edublogs](#), students of all ages were able to access assignments

independently. Additionally, each student in grade 4 and up developed their own online blog, which encouraged documenting, a student-centered framework that promotes looking for one's own learning, capturing evidence of that learning, reflecting on that learning, and sharing the learning.

One Tanakh teacher at Ida Crown Jewish Academy in Chicago, IL, changed her regular mode of summative assessment and instead of giving a final exam with essays, asked the students to design five unique t-shirts for five characters they had studied over the year. In a written assignment, students had to describe a t-shirt that either symbolized the actual personality and the growth and evolution of the character or was the type of shirt the character would wear (explaining everything about what the t-shirt is, says, and looks like, and how it fits into the character's personality, growth, and evolution over time). A clear rubric was provided, but the assignment called for individual interpretation rather than having a single right answer.

Even in early childhood settings, schools adjusted for the pandemic and students rose to the occasion. At Hillel Torah Day School in Skokie, IL, the kindergarten developed a program in which each child received an iPad and learned the independent skills needed to function in a virtual classroom. Even when students were back in school, the class continued to use the iPads, which now were loaded with the SeeSaw app, allowing students to work individually and progress through content at their own level and pace. Students who missed school could keep up with classwork, increasing autonomy even among the youngest learners.

Student agency is about empowering the students within our classrooms to

be decisive and involved in work that is relevant and meaningful to them. Students develop agency when given the capacity to act independently and to further their own growth, take ownership of their learning, and make decisions along the way to create a meaningful experience. Self-pacing (or asynchronous learning) increases student ownership while project-based learning provides motivation and opportunities for engagement, both enabling student agency. The learner becomes empowered to develop perseverance, resiliency, and self-efficacy that will stay with them long after their school days have passed.

How can schools successfully maintain, expand, and scale the many innovative, creative, and educationally powerful adaptations that occurred during the pandemic when COVID subsides? The key to maintaining important innovations and adaptations is to keep students front and center in the discussion about what worked and what did not work for them. As we begin to discuss the coming academic year, we need to design learning that focuses on the skills students will need and creates opportunities for showcasing the relevance of content to their lives.

Students can clearly tell us what they need in their educational experiences. Are we willing to listen to them?

# Torah Texts and the “Texts” of Our Lives

Gavriella Troper-Hochstein and Ziva Hassenfeld

In the Spring of 2020, as the world reeled from the seismic shifts precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, Professor Ziva Hassenfeld (second author) initiated a teacher research project with her Brandeis University lab, SCRoLL, to study the pedagogy of early elementary education remote Tanakh instruction. Our research team set out to capture the unique pandemic era culture of textual interpretation that developed in our combined preK-1st grade classroom. The K-8 Jewish day school in which we taught was operating in a hybrid mode. The specific students that we were teaching were those who had opted out of in-person learning for personal reasons. What we found in this classroom was more than just an unusual learning environment: we saw a group of students profoundly shaped by their new day-to-day reality and a classroom that was, rather than an encapsulated place of instruction, a fluid space, providing a window into the ways children’s learning is fed not only by school, but by home, family, and each moment of their daily lives.

In this new and uncertain world of the past year, our students continually stepped into unprecedented experiences and social roles with shifting dynamics and expertise. We want to suggest that the milieu in which our virtual Tanakh class took place impacted the methods students used to read and understand the biblical texts in our class. Students felt comfortable



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moving between text and life seamlessly, perhaps more than ever, because their life was a text, in as much need of close reading as any classic source.

Through the series of vignettes shared here, we hope to demonstrate the ways in which our students brought the profoundly felt impact of the pandemic and a politically tumultuous year into our classroom, and into their study of biblical text. Whether through direct connections between the material and personal experiences, or through side conversations that influenced the virtual classroom culture, the specter of the pandemic was ever present in this learning space.

### **Perceptions of Authority: A COVID Swab, A Snake, and Birthday Cake**

A student logged into our Zoom class late one day. “I missed a lot,” she told the class repeatedly. She was eager to share the reason why: she had had a long wait in the car, and then “they” had put something in her nose that hurt—the swab for a COVID-19 test. We can hear a note of hesitancy in her voice about the last details. Though her parent clarified from off-screen (“They did a COVID test”), the student seemed unsure at first what it even was that was done to her nose, or why it was done. Certainly, she knew that it was something different; maybe a little special (no one else had had this done), but this uncertainty held fear as well. The other students seemed to share her frightened hesitation, as we see in their many questions: How much did it hurt? Why did she need the test? What was the test for again? Did her nose bleed?

The last was asked repeatedly by a student who usually displayed plenty of confidence and knowledgeability in the classroom. Her

strengths were in direct interpretation of the text—providing the “right” or expected answer, pointing out whatever was obvious or literal in the text. She objected directly at times to other students bringing examples from their own lives to the text study. This child was uncharacteristically troubled by the potential negative aspects of COVID testing, much as she expressed concern about connecting sacred text to everyday life. Despite her enthusiasm to participate, in her we see a resistance to the drastic changes of the pandemic world: resistance to the porous nature of the classroom, and resistance to the frightening realities of the pandemic.

A key element of our students’ interpretive toolbox was the knowledge of authorities in their lives—teachers, parents, and other adults. They would often reference the explanation given by a parent as their reasoning for an interpretation (“I know because my dad said so”). Yet, although peers in a physical classroom might normally talk through new, sometimes scary life experiences together, sharing the knowledge they gain, these pandemic life experiences were totally new to the adults around them as well. There was no adult to assure them that the way the COVID-19 swab felt was alright—it was quite possibly their parent or guardian’s first COVID-19 swab as well.

In the face of her classmate’s concern, the first student was emboldened. She was the expert here, the only one of her peers to have this knowledge. As if to reassure them all, she changed her telling of the experience, concluding the conversation with this summary: “It didn’t bleed... it tickled only a little.” In this moment of uncertainty, lacking the authority of an adult, we saw the students turn to one another for guidance and to better

understand the unknown parts of the new world they live in.

We soon turned to the biblical text at hand for the day. This student, having been placed in the role of expert for those first few minutes of class, carried this confidence with her through the text discussion. She contributed more frequently than she had in the past, shared her ideas with confidence, and showed comfort with disagreeing with the more “knowledgeable” students.

Both the absence and presence of adult knowledge authority were palpable in our classroom, emphasized by the fluid nature of virtual learning. Parents were often pulled into the Zoom box to confirm ideas the students had shared or referenced as text sources during discussions. In one conversation, which began with the biblical story of the Garden of Eden and the snake but quickly veered off topic, three students debated the dangerous nature of snakes, looking to the authority of their fathers as the final word on whether snakes are harmless or to be avoided. In this conversation, one student went so far as to tell another student that she was wrong about a snake she’d seen in her backyard. The objecting student said, “I think that snake was not a garden snake.” But the other child had an iron-clad defense: “My dad told me [it was]!”

Themes of knowledge-sharing and authority in the social realm also became evident during our research. “I had a birthday,” one student said at the beginning of a class. His classmates quickly chimed in, sharing which month their birthdays were in. Ziva asked this student what he did for his birthday. Her tone was awkward and her words were vague, reflecting her own uncertainty of what a child’s birthday


celebration could look like in the midst of the pandemic. The students seemed to instantly understand her confusion—they explained what the theme of the party was, and how it wasn’t actually in-person or synchronous. In a “normal” classroom the teacher is the authority, but here, the combined effects of the pandemic and Ziva’s use of a student-centered pedagogical approach created a culture of knowledge sharing. The students were perfectly comfortable stepping in and demonstrating their authority on the realities of their day-to-day pandemic lives.

Present in the dynamic of personal authority was a more classic kindergarten social negotiation. One student was confused about whether or not the party was in-person. She wasn’t there, and, “I don’t know why he didn’t invite me,” she said, given that she always gets invited to birthday parties. Another girl clarified again that it was virtual and asynchronous, and that’s why the other student couldn’t “be there.”

In asserting their primary knowledge of their own lives, the students not only took up a stance of authority in the classroom, but also processed the strangeness of their new reality together—there was hurt on the part of one student when she initially thought she missed out on a major, big-deal event (an in-person party), followed by the reassurance of her peer and, perhaps, a certain sadness on all their parts that it was, in fact, only a virtual event. In this simple conversation, the disparate pieces of our students’ new educational realities came together: they were at once authorities where previously an adult would have been, they served as supports for one another in a challenging time, and they were children grappling with a painful social loss.

## Conclusion

In our classroom, the combined effect of the pandemic and Ziva's pedagogical priority to emphasize student voices in text discussion, and all discussion, led to a blurring of the lines between personal life and classroom, and textual and interpretive authority. This boundary crossing was different from what we have observed in physical classrooms. Students were able to bring in external sources (parents), were pushed to rely on one another, and to become interpretive authorities themselves. This bled into the ways they positioned themselves vis-a-vis the biblical texts and as interpreters. Certainly, the children have felt the harsh realities of the pandemic every day, from the pain of being separated from friends to the frustrations of virtual learning, and the inevitable fear of a dangerous, poorly understood disease that has spread rapidly in their communities. But in this year of loss and sadness, we have seen a silver lining that may well stay with us for years to come. In the upside-down world our young students inhabited, they found in themselves flexibility, autonomy, and authority. These new roles were not checked at the door of the classroom. This is perhaps because there was no door, or perhaps because it's simply a better position to be in for learning.



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# “What am I Missing?” Social Information Processing in Remote Learning

Miriam Hirsch

Nobel Prize winner Kazuo Ishiguro’s new novel [Klara and the Sun](#) describes a world where artificial friends are acquired as companions for children. Programmed to learn from interactions with people and the environment, Klara, the artificial friend who narrates the novel, has trouble picking up social cues from her companion’s mom.

*... yet the Mother’s gaze, which never softened or wavered, and the very way she was standing there, arms crossed over her front, fingers clutching at the material of her coat, made me realize there were many signals I hadn’t yet learned to understand. (p. 24)*

In remote learning contexts, the issue is not only learning to understand the clues and cues of our students’ behavior but the very fact that we often cannot see the gestures, feel the tension, or track postural shifts as teachers intuitively and automatically do in shared physical classroom spaces.

Social Information Processing Theory postulated by J. B. Walther, examines how relationships are developed through computer mediated communication, devoid of non-verbal cues. His work focused mainly on computer mediated technologies, such as email, instant messaging, and chat rooms, but can be considered in relation to situations with reduced access to non-verbal cues such as Zoom classrooms. More than twenty years ago [Walther](#) raised the prescient conundrum: “How can the same group of technologies be described as a limitation and a liberation?” In fact, the query neatly sums up teaching and learning on Zoom. Schooling was able to continue,



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albeit significantly transformed, liberating the roles of commuting, carpooling, and the physical schooling building. In some cases, asynchronous instruction and increased flipped classroom models liberated teacher-led instruction in favor of more student-centered inquiry and independent learning. However, it is also evident that limitations of engagement, focus, and motivation across this past year, not to mention Zoom fatigue, threatened student access to learning. Moreover, I posit that the lack of social information processing between teachers and students reduced the ability of teachers to interpret and respond efficiently to student academic, behavioral, social, and emotional needs. Further, the opportunity for social-emotional learning typically developed through daily classroom existence disappeared into the ether. Let's break this down further: What social cues are teachers missing from remote learning contexts and how do they matter?

### Missing the Walk

[Walther](#) explains that a key difference between processes in computer mediated communication and face-to-face communication has to do with the slower exchange rate of social information:

*When we encounter other people via computer mediated communication, on the Internet, we most frequently do not have the variety, abundance, simultaneity, and relative effortlessness of means by which to size up others and by which to signal the characteristics we want them to associate with ourselves.*

Pre-COVID, a teacher could tell when a child was having an off day by the way he

or she entered the classroom, hid in his or her sweatshirt hood, or broke from a typical pattern of participation. On Zoom, there is no opportunity to glean or validate such information about the child's emotional barometer from his or her posture, gesture, dress, or pattern of participation. Self-reporting of how a student is feeling offers a poor proxy for the keen observational skill that most teachers innately possess from spending their lives among schoolchildren. In addition, it is so easy for students to dissemble and “fake out” their teachers in remote learning situations. Watching students at play, entering our classrooms, putting away their belongings, or diving into their seats provides more instrumental data than the private chat feature can ever generate.

### Missing the Management

The electricity that enervates classrooms is missing from remote learning. Yes, I can look into my camera and smile meaningfully for the class, but I cannot remind a learner to stay on task by making eye contact. I cannot send the “make a better choice” message by bending down near a child who needs this cue to stay on task, with a wry smile and intentional eye contact. Yes, I can nod while a student is talking, but I cannot simultaneously circle the room and draw the others into the discussion or keep them invested with a spiral hand motion or by standing near their desks. While many management issues disappeared on Zoom when teachers simply muted their more challenging students, the effect was that the students most in need of learning impulse control and self-regulation never got the opportunity to develop these skills. I know so many parents and teachers are worried about academic losses from the COVID-disrupted

school year. However, the behavioral gaps for students who sorely needed to learn how to comply with social and behavioral group norms in classroom contexts have also fallen behind. That is the kind of learning that must be demonstrated, rehearsed, reviewed, responded to, and nurtured in live physical classroom environments, not in break-out rooms or on Google Jamboard.

### Missing the Mark

The sameness of schooling in remote learning contexts can deaden morale, depress interest, and increase inertia. In my work training teachers, I have to repeat directions *ad nauseum* and I review answers to the same questions minutes apart. I have wonderful students, but no one is paying attention anymore and it is not entirely their fault; this is not the way humans are wired to learn. We need to move and play and quest, and touch and toss and rearrange. I used to rail against Jewish day schools that placed young children in classroom seats all day long. I never thought it could get worse. All teachers (and students) pretty much look the same in a Zoom square, even if they change their virtual background or wear crazy hats. Social Information Processing Theory assumes that people are generally motivated to develop impressions and relationships with each other, but bereft of nonverbal cues, are the truly important bits that make us unique even visible or audible? Are those lasting impactful student-teacher relationships even possible? The gossamer thread of alliance that breaks with “end meeting for all” simply doesn’t do justice to the feelings of warmth and energy that pulsate with life in shared physical classroom communities.

We teachers did well in remote learning

contexts, but let’s not forget that we also missed out on fully knowing our students, helping them, and making an indelible imprint on their lives. Limited visual and verbal social information may liberate our jobs in concrete ways, but what Walther calls the “thick layers of software-imposed interaction structures” also reduce our abilities to read and message our students. As we return to more typical teaching and learning contexts and “environmental realities” creep back in, it will be interesting to see how lessons learned affect lessons learned.

Let’s curb the instinct to hurry childhood onward for fear of losing academic progress. If we don’t restore children’s confidence in schooling and reclaim school communities as safe, healthy spaces to learn, we risk more than delayed curricular benchmarks. If teachers do not invest in getting to know who these children are now, then we will never teach them properly. They are not like pre-COVID children and they will need our expert eyes and ears to guide their learning in developmentally appropriate ways. Let’s focus on aspects of classroom management that create social ties binding children to each other with a sense of belonging through rituals and procedures that remind students how societies care for, respect, and are responsible for one another. It is not enough to have the *pitgam* (proverb) on the wall, we need to model, demonstrate, rehearse, and review how being together should look, sound, and feel. Only then can we be sure that we will truly understand what we were missing, and what a profound blessing it is to arrive at the schoolhouse door.

# Professional Learning in Digital Spaces

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## Teacher, Learner, and Content in a Context

The Mandel Teacher Educator Institute (MTEI) engages its participants in improving the quality of teaching and learning in Jewish spaces through an intensive 2-year cohort-based professional learning program and ongoing graduate learning. At the end of 2019, a small group of graduates and leadership began planning our biennial 2020 Graduate Conference, an opportunity to share successes and collaborate around challenges of leading professional development for Jewish educators. As the COVID-19 pandemic persisted, the group embraced the challenge of transitioning an in-person conference into an online four-day Graduate Gathering. With this pivot, the planning team found itself reflecting on the changing nature of teaching and learning and invoking [MTEI's Principles of Professional Development](#) in new and expansive ways. The shift in format drew the planning team's attention to Teacher, Learner, and Content in a Context, the MTEI principle which came to influence every aspect of planning and organization of the professional learning gathering. We recognized that the key to a successful online, or hybrid, event, lies in considering each of the relationships within

this triangle of teacher-learner-content and being intentional about the context in which those relationships play out. This meant we had to think not only about the programmatic content of the Gathering, but also about how we would foster those relationships before, during, and after the event.

## Building Relationships Before the Event

We knew that relationships and expectations were forming long before the professional learning sessions began. Whether in-person, online, or in hybrid spaces, it is necessary to consider the different relationships that will be at play. We spent many months ideating and prototyping an interactive set of materials to send to participants in advance of the Gathering. This was no ordinary swag box. A cover welcome letter described the interactive contents of the mailing, giving instructions that the folder remain sealed until we opened it as a community during our opening session. The folder included materials to be used during our time online throughout the Gathering (e.g., "coffee-break-to-go" with a branded coaster, Bingo card highlighting personal and professional connection opportunities

during the learning, and a [Comment Cube](#) that attendees built together as part of our opening program).

Using these pieces to interact across space and time helped us develop new understandings regarding pre-program mailings. Material sent to participants prior to a professional development program or gathering must physically engage each participant and be something that participants will use together. They must be playful, warmly inviting opportunities for individuals to share their personalities with each other in the gathering space. They must be intentionally connected to the learning and learning goals of professional development, in our case tangible items within an ethereal digital space embodying our principles and connecting the learner (along the relational triangle) more intimately with both the content and other learners.

We also maximized opportunities for asynchronous online connections. We developed an online interactive directory to engage participants with each other. We designed, shared, and regularly updated a virtual conference binder as a live “homebase” for everything conference-related. Our participant WhatsApp group created a feeling of collective excitement and community. Participants were invited ahead of time to download and play with the core apps and online platforms that we would be using. Importantly, we offered multiple ways to ask questions and get help, various video tutorials and infographic tip sheets, and a carefully planned social media campaign across multiple communication channels to share the aforementioned.

### Warmth and Inclusivity in Online Spaces

While we initially mourned the loss of cherished time together in person, we came to understand that, with intentional design, our online space had significant potential for being just as, if not more, inclusive. Our graduates hail from a wide swath of Jewish educational contexts across North America and Israel; moving the Gathering online made participation feasible for many more individuals.

Our online professional learning was also more flexible. While our Gathering was entirely online, participants were straddling online and in-person spaces and obligations. We encouraged participants to be present for as much or as little as their personal and professional schedules allowed, maximizing our asynchronous digital spaces to build connections and maintain momentum from session to session and day to day.

Our team was cognizant of how we were welcoming everyone from wherever they were physically, emotionally, or intellectually. In designing the schedule and sessions, at every turn, we asked ourselves: What will this transition look like and feel like? How can we ease this transition? How will we provide immediate support when needed? How will participants move in our online space as well as their home spaces? In response, we crafted a schedule that included frequent breaks of differing amounts of time and parallel scheduling of similar sessions across multiple days. Each day started and ended with joyous, purposeful social/networking time. Faculty workshops, which are often a highlight for participants, were at parallel times on successive days.

We also considered the visual experience of the online space and how it, too, could contribute to a welcoming, warm environment.

We spent time branding and designing those online spaces, choosing images, color palettes, and language that welcomed people into a learning atmosphere. Our landing page became a “lobby.” Each meeting “room,” making use of digital images, had a different feel related to the content of the learning. We encouraged everyone to take pictures and make note of quotes that were collated into a digital gathering scrapbook. We also designated daily “themes” (for instance, “ugly” Hanukkah sweater day) that helped make learning at home feel a little more joyful and connective.

To encourage our facilitators to sustain the same intentional approach to relationships in their sessions, we asked each presenter to indicate how they would welcome participants to the space, introduce participants to each other, make the session interactive (no lectures), and invite participants to consider applications of the session content to their respective work. We provided a lesson plan template that noted these components, as well as a prompt for pre-planning how digital tools would be used in the session. The planning team reviewed these lesson plans with each presenter, assisting them in developing parallel relational approaches across the diverse conference offerings. In addition, we offered each presenter the opportunity to be matched with a thought partner for co-planning.

The intentional design that shaped our online learning spaces carried into our evening social programs. As with any in-person gathering, the less formal social interactions played an integral role in establishing new relationships and reconnecting old colleagues. We hosted a book club, cohort reunions, and, perhaps most memorably, an online

scavenger hunt that spanned the physical and digital realms to connect participants in new ways, engaging them as humans needing connection and as educational leaders seeking professional development.

### Digital Technologies that Embody Our Values

While many tools exist to support this kind of welcoming and inclusion, we highlight a few here that we found to be particularly agile in creating the relational context and in bridging online and in-person spaces. We aimed to counter the detached feeling of being in a static 2D video frame. We chose platforms that would give the feel of movement and intimacy within the online space (e.g., [SpatialChat](#)), be easy to access and use online and offline (e.g., [Goosechase](#)), and were customizable to provide an environment and a mood (e.g., [QiQoChat](#)). While the aforementioned platforms were new to many of our participants, we also turned to tools familiar to our graduates to support the relationships around the relational triangle and build a supportive environment within which to interact, including:

- [Edmodo](#), an online learning management system that currently houses our graduate network, as a repository for resources, a place to ask questions, and an asynchronous space for ongoing conversations related to and stemming from the learning sessions.
- [WhatsApp](#), a text and voice messaging app, to take the place of those hallway conversations we knew we would miss. We used a planning team group to quickly problem solve, check in, and celebrate moments of accomplishment.

The participants' group generated excitement about the Gathering, quickly informed participants of changes in the program, and offered help via live chat.

- [Padlet](#), a collaborative digital curation space. Each presenter, and session participants, had access to a designated Padlet Wall to populate with session materials and interactive session components, empowering presenters and participants to collaborate amongst themselves around content and ideas.

The flexibility and user-end simplicity of this portfolio of tools created a collage of interactive experiences in which participants expanded their knowledge and know-how in the realm of online teaching and learning. While it was not necessarily easy, and it required us to learn how to adapt or use different online tools, we found that remaining grounded in our principles enabled us to create a gathering that lived up to our own expectations for teaching and learning.

### Courageous Leaders in Relationship

Our volunteer planning team of seven graduates and leaders did not all know each other before beginning this process in late 2019. The team was intentionally chosen to represent different cohorts, geographic regions of the country, and multiple Jewish educational contexts. Yet, through our shared language, we built our own relational learning community, a learning space where our blossoming relationships directly impacted how we taught and learned from each other about professional development in online spaces. We used each other's strengths to maximize our potential, self-selecting components of the Gathering to plan, offering

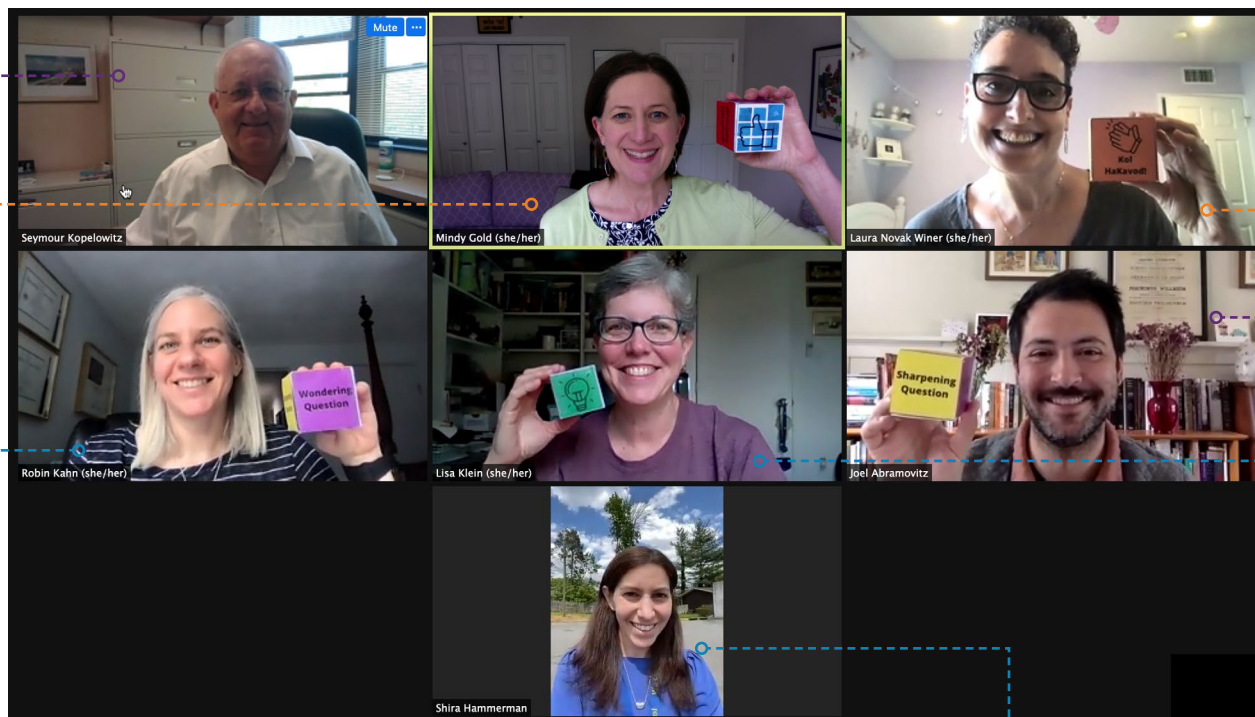
our areas of expertise while challenging ourselves to embrace new experiences. For example, the use of new online platforms required both the expertise of our in-house educational technology expert, as well as the courage and open-mindedness of the planning team to whom these platforms were less familiar, the latter being essential to the team's work and success. Throughout the year leading up to the Gathering, our team was invigorated by a collaborative planning process that valued experimentation, revision, and iteration while keeping our goals around connection, relationships, and learning always at the forefront.

We note the dynamics of the planning team to emphasize how important it is for leaders to focus on their own relationship building as they embark upon supporting and building the relationships of stakeholders. We believe that the success of the Gathering was fully dependent on the relationships built and held amongst the planning team. Supporting each other through a difficult year brought our participants' challenges more into focus as we planned for their professional development.

### Moving Forward

This planning team has not yet disbanded. In fact, we are growing. The team has expanded to include other graduates eager to contribute to designing additional graduate learning opportunities for and with our peers. This work embodies MTEI's commitment to supporting our graduates' ongoing, active role in leading their own learning. Given what we have learned from this experience, we envision diversifying our graduate offerings, so that we have in-person, online, and hybrid opportunities for professional learning. We will continue to think carefully about how to

engage participants with each other and with content well before and after the event. We will use digital tools that work across time and space, carefully and purposefully choosing only those that are easily accessible and that build relationships. The relational triangle of teacher, learner, and content exists in all learning situations; this triangle remains our compass. We have come to see that the online space is yet another context we need to be attuned to as Jewish educators.



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# Caring for the Caregivers

Yael Harari and Marc Fein

The transition from in-person to online learning necessitated by COVID-19 had many implications, including detrimental effects on student mental health. Precisely at an age when social interaction is crucial for development, lockdowns separated students from their peers. This separation, in addition to academic concerns, generated stress and anxiety in children. During this challenging period of rapid change, teachers were expected to create stability and certainty both in their capacities as teachers in the virtual classroom and as caregivers for the students.

This extra layer of responsibility needs to be appreciated as being in addition to educators' own increased mental health stressors. Educators dealt with their own struggles during the pandemic: learning new digital skills, caring for elderly parents, managing children who were learning from home, navigating the new implications of having parents as a potential zoom audience, anticipating professional insecurity, and dealing with the financial implications of the new work environment. Leah Juelke, an experienced and award-winning teacher interviewed about her experiences over the last year, says that nothing prepared her for teaching during the coronavirus pandemic: "The level of stress is exponentially higher. It's like nothing I've experienced before."

In February 2021, an informal survey of more than 50 Jewish educators in North America revealed that two-thirds of teachers reported not receiving additional mental health support for themselves, nor additional professional development for how to support the emotional needs of their students. Almost half of the respondents (43%) offered suggestions for additional training that they would request from their institutions. This could indicate that educators are aware of the current resources to support their students but believe that additional resources are necessary during the pandemic.

This survey confirmed important trends that we noticed throughout the year with our fellows. At TalentEducators, we recruit talented people to the field of Jewish education. Our main focus



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is bringing new people to the field and finding them the right positions for their unique strengths. In order to ensure the success of these placements, we create and fund bespoke training and mentoring plans for our fellows, supporting each individual in his or her particular position. To that end, we provide our fellows with ongoing support to develop their pedagogy and content. Part of this support involves monthly meetings with their peers in a professional learning community. We noticed over the course of COVID-19 how these groups shifted their focus from content-based discussion to conversations and strategies around emotional support both for themselves and for their students.

In our six cohorts this year, we have seen educators searching for tools to support their students' wellbeing as well as their own. For example, in our middle school and high school Judaic studies teacher cohort, our fellows identified the major stressors as (1) the near constant "unknowns", (2) balancing student needs with the curriculum, and (3) being COVID rule enforcers more than educators, mentors, and friends to their students. This led our facilitator to create sessions on attuned listening in order to support our fellows' ability to create a sense of community and belonging for their students, and perhaps for themselves as well.

This past summer, Prizmah conducted a pulse survey that polled 81 school leaders about the effects of COVID-19 on areas such as educational models, enrollment, and budget. The survey revealed professional development as the area that school leaders cut the most from their budget. Respondents reported cutting between 25-75% of their annual professional development budget. Without a doubt, this on-the-ground decision

was not taken lightly. That said, given what we know about how isolating the teaching profession can be, and given what we now know about the significant mental health stressors in the midst of the pandemic, perhaps this strategy needs to be re-examined in the long-term. We need to double down on support for our teachers rather than cut those services, and that support needs to reflect the new roles that teachers serve in our (almost) post-pandemic world.

As we enter the upcoming school year, we advocate for a shift in professional development and training for educators. This shift should recognize teachers' role as caregivers for their students and should support them accordingly. This means that professional development and training programs that generally focus on curricula and content should be heavily integrated with social-emotional learning techniques. In addition, educational leaders need to focus on educators' mental health and actively support it through proactive conversations, intentional check-ins, and staff workshops. We believe that this shift in support will directly translate into stronger developmental and academic outcomes for our students.

Virginia Leona Archer, a middle school teacher in Arlington, recently pointed out in an article on NPR: "Our profession is a nurturing one, but we also are humans that need to be poured into. We need to be nurtured, too."