

# Another Language for Learning

Why are the arts important in Jewish education? How does integrating the arts make a difference in the practice of teaching and the process of learning? How can the arts transform curriculum and help us meet the ongoing challenges of Jewish education?

In the discussion that follows, Debbie Krivoy, Managing Director of Avoda Arts, Noreen Green, Conductor and Artistic Director of the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony, Carole Zawatsky, Executive Director of the Maltz Museum of Jewish Heritage in Ohio, Peter Geffen, Executive Director of the Center for Jewish History and Founder of the Abraham Joshua Heschel Day School in New York, and Susan Couden, a painter and art teacher at the Columbus Jewish Day School in Ohio, examine the philosophy of arts-in-education as it relates to a variety of Jewish learning settings and explore the ways in which the arts are currently transforming the Jewish educational landscape.

**CAROLE ZAWATSKY:** Can Jewish education create a nexus for aesthetic experiences and Jewish experiences, or do these experiences need to be separated?

**SUSAN COUDEN:** As adults and children, we approach a work of art and see so much if we're trained to be look at symbols. For example, I've given a lesson to children and their grandparents on a *hamsa* where we look at a number of different hamsas and see the different symbols and what those symbols can mean. So many good questions were raised: What is a hand? What is an open hand? What happens when I put my hand on another hand, when I place my child's hand, when I place my own hand, when I look at these symbols, when I see them in different contexts, when I read the word "hand"? I start seeing, being curious about the meanings of things. Art teachers give children the tools, resources, and opportunities to analyze, experience and personally explore concepts that artists explore — history, culture, the nature of things, God, good, evil, family, emotions, longing, inequity. Like text, art can be full of wonders and secrets. And learning to understand art is intellectually rewarding and personally fulfilling.

Giving students the opportunity to visually express their own understandings of Jewish ideas and Judaism gives children opportunities to "say" things on a deeper level than their words would allow. Sometimes that envisioning helps them give words to their ideas, feelings and understandings.

**PETER GEFFEN:** It seems to me that the question should be: "How is it possible to conceive of Jewish education *without* the integration of the arts? The operative word is "integration." Although art is a discrete part of Jewish education, it must be pervasive because art verifies the integrity of our tradition. Art

is the expression of the people related to their religious and national life.

The building of the Golden Calf at that very early stage of our peoplehood isn't only about idolatry. It's also about the need for an aesthetic presence in their midst, in the midst of all that emptiness of the desert that was around them. Arts should be at the core of what we do in education because the arts elaborate who the Jewish people is, has been, and will become. The arts contain the manifestation of our collective and individual stories. We don't have very much literature from ancient times, but we have an extraordinary collection of art and music.

The Jewish people have consistently, from ancient times, been deeply attached to musical expression. Our chants and the sounding of the shofar go back hundreds and (in some cases) thousands of years. We might note that it is Bezalel, the artist, and not Moshe, the political and spiritual leader, about whom the Torah uses descriptive language that completely encompasses all of our most intellectual, communal, ethical, as well as aesthetic, values.

Educators are not encouraged to feel that the arts are a legitimate integral part of our educational programs. We are rightly convinced that text is very important. We are somewhat convinced that the Hebrew language is vital. We have a conviction (although it is difficult for us to implement) that prayer and observances of holidays are important. But art is a sidebar. It must squeeze itself in. It is the first thing to go if there is not enough money. It is not considered a core piece. No teacher would say, "I don't really have time for Torah this year." There's no question in my experience that administrators often see the arts as an ancillary piece of the pie, and our curricula reflect it. This is less the case in early childhood but as children get older this reality sets in more and more each year.

## New Voices Essay Contest

The Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture and *Sh'ma* are sponsoring an essay contest to spark a communal discussion on the future of North American Jewish life.

- ❖ Five winners will receive cash prizes of \$1000, and ten of the essays, including the winners, will be published in a special issue of the journal *Sh'ma*
- ❖ Contestants must be between the ages of 22–40 years old
- ❖ Essays cannot exceed 1000 words
- ❖ Essays must be postmarked or sent electronically to *Sh'ma* by April 1, 2005
- ❖ Essays will respond to a set of questions focusing on New Visions for Jewish Life

Questions are posted, along with detailed guidelines and application, on [www.shma.com](http://www.shma.com).

**NOREEN GREEN:** I'm going to have to disagree from my experience. When our teachers teach a holiday, like Chanukah, they include songs, making a *chanukia*, and food preparation.

**CAROLE ZAWATSKY:** But much of what we accept as art education wouldn't pass for science education, but it makes the cut as education in art. How do we raise the bar and the level of arts education in Jewish schools?

**DEBBIE KRIVROY:** We raise the bar by creating substantive, challenging, and varied learning experiences that help students connect learning to their own lives. We build on the theory of "multiple intelligences" and on the growing body of research about the ways young people learn, communicate, and understand the world.

But I think it's important to draw a distinction between learning *about* Jewish art — styles of Chanukah lamps, the Chagall

windows — and learning Jewish content *through* the arts. We have to push past the concept of *hiddur mitzvah* to the idea that the arts are actually a valid and vibrant way to organize an array of Jewish learning. The arts are an educational methodology, an avenue for teaching content.

**NOREEN GREEN:** We use different disciplines of art to teach culture, history, and religion. But teachers need workshops to learn the tools of using arts to teach children.

**DEBBIE KRIVROY:** I agree that teacher training is key. School administrators and board members also need to acknowledge that the arts are core subjects and that an arts-infused curriculum enhances learning. We're talking about making a significant shift in school culture, where art is more than an enrichment ac-

tivity, but rather a primary context for learning and sharing ideas. We need to train teachers to use a more facilitative style in the classroom, to let students begin where they are, to ask provocative, open-ended questions. For students and teachers, this means learning to think like an artist — looking at things more closely, or in different ways to gain new perspectives, interpreting and reinterpreting a concept to create new ideas, and going beyond ordinary ways of thinking and doing things.

**SUSAN COUDEN:** I believe that an artist's task is to try to understand life and express that understanding in a way that's different than how a scientist or mathematician understands and expresses their understanding of life. It's important to allow children to explore different ways of accessing life's meaning, feeling curious, making connections.

**DEBBIE KRIVROY:** We know that the arts are empowering and nurturing experiences. We're making the case to the Jewish community that the arts can also yield deep learning. The arts stimulate creative expression and critical thinking and provide a multiplicity of paths, a range of ways, for students to absorb content and make meaning from it. And we're not just talking about using the arts with young children. For example, the arts provide a deeply personal and developmentally appropriate learning environment for adolescents. A comment I hear from teens all the time is that art helps them express themselves in ways that they normally can't.

The bottom line is that students have positive associations with the arts, and Jewish education must have a creative and personally relevant component if it's going to make a lasting impact on our students' lives.

**PETER GEFFEN:** Arts offer opportunities to students who are not text or auditory learners, but who learn through the tactile experience of making and creating. Jews live through our art, our music, our expressive forms as well as through our literature.

**SUSAN COUDEN:** Children depend on us to carve out these spaces — kids need to be able to dance an idea, move an idea through their bodies, find a resonating place inside of them, sing that idea. They need that in order to thoughtfully understand Judaism.