



# Lev Ha'inyan / לב העניין

"The Heart of the Matter"  
«לב העניין של הדבר»

Commentary on Issues in Jewish Education by Schechter Manhattan's Head of School  
**Dr. Steven C. Lorch**

March 2008/ Adar I - Adar II 5768

Vol. 1 Number 7

## Highlights

**March 27 -  
Kickoff Israel @ 60  
Program**

**March 31 through  
April 4-  
Differentiation Week II**

**April 2 -  
ANNUAL BENEFIT  
DINNER "Cultivating the  
mind, hands, soul and  
heart of each child"**

**April 6-8 -  
PEJE Conference  
presentations by Dr.  
Cindy Dolgin, Elisheva  
Urbas, and Dr. Steven  
Lorch**

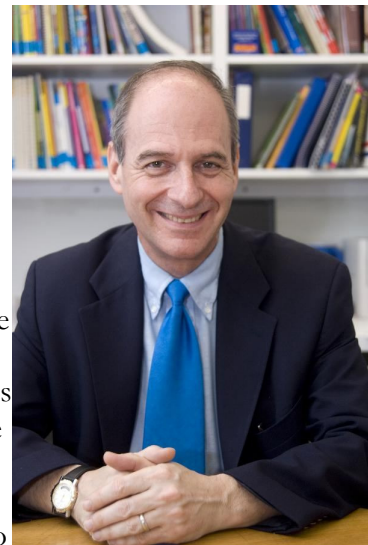
## A New Paradigm of Integration

by: Dr. Steven C. Lorch

### The Challenge

The integration of Jewish and general studies is a bit of a strange bird: it is central to the *raison d'être* of Jewish day schools, certainly in the top five in just about everyone's list of what such schools should be promoting, and perhaps in the top three. On the other hand, it is less central, possibly even peripheral, to the daily workings of our schools. Integration is nobody's job (with the possible exception of the students!). Because schools structure their curriculum, teaching, and staffing around subject-matter disciplines, and because 99% of curriculum materials and teaching aids are intra-disciplinary, schools measure their effectiveness in terms of the extent to which each subject is taught well in its own right. It takes a great deal of effort for those situated within Jewish day schools to shift their focus and efforts away from teaching math well, and teaching Hebrew well, and teaching social studies and Tanach and art and Jewish holidays well, to developing integrated teaching units that bring the ideas or insights of one discipline to bear on another. Nearly every school I know is stretched to its limit to develop an excellent subject-based curriculum and continually review and improve it; virtually no discretionary time is left over for thinking about integration, much less doing anything about it.

And another paradox: it appears that the integration of Jewish and general studies works best when it's spontaneous, and less well when it's carefully planned. One of the keys to success in integration is surprise, the flash of intuition or realization that





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6:00 pm**

**Sondra A. Weiss**  
Vision in Jewish  
Education Award

**Elisheva S. Urbas**  
Vision in Leadership

comes when two previously unrelated ideas, or bits of knowledge, are brought into relation to each other. Teachers in whose classrooms moments of integration occur on a somewhat frequent basis know that they've orchestrated such a moment when the students' eyes light up, or - in the best case - when they emit an audible gasp. In fact, the locus in which the only meaningful form of integration of Jewish and general studies occurs in schools is inside the heads of the students. The fresher the insight is at this moment, the more the integration will come to life; and conversely, the more rehearsed or rehashed - in other words, the further removed from the student - the insight is, the more pedestrian, or strained, or even boring, it will seem. But then, how can a school build one of its key educative functions around unplanned, spontaneous moments?

New Theory

I've been thinking about the integration of Jewish and general studies for a long time. As a subject of professional interest and academic inquiry, I can trace it back at least 35 years to my days in graduate school. A number of papers I wrote for courses toward my master's degree were directly related to this topic, and my entire doctoral program was oriented toward producing a dissertation entitled "The Convergence of Jewish and Western Culture as Exemplified Through Music: Some Educational Consequences."

In this thesis, I pointed out, as I did above, that the usual grounds on which integration is attempted are shallow and superficial - studying about trees in science as a means of integrating with Tu Bish'vat, or visiting the post office in conjunction with studying about Rosh Hashanah greetings. I then suggested that a deeper understanding of the relationship between the subject matters of Jewish and general studies was needed, so that attempts by teachers and schools to make connections between the two would pique curiosity and spark interest - while at the same time reflect real, organic relationships between the disciplines. This deeper understanding was to be attained by examining the subject matter through the lens of philosophy of culture, and specifically by using an anthropological tool known as structuralist analysis. I exemplified this analysis by comparing Jewish and Western music, concluding that the areas within these fields that showed the greatest promise for integration, based on their shared structural characteristics, were traditional Jewish liturgy and contemporary (avant-garde) Western music.

Practice

Upon completing my dissertation, I went to work in schools, and I quickly discovered that the elegant theory I had constructed bore no relationship whatsoever to the daily work of schools and schoolpeople. When the curricular challenges

Award

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were as fundamental as, What should we teach in Mishnah, and why, or How can we teach American history in such a way that children aren't bored to tears, questions of integrating the two subject areas never arose. And on the rare occasions when some colleagues did express interest in exploring interdisciplinary connections, there was never time to apply the lens of philosophy of culture or structuralist analysis.

There were occasional exceptions: an interdisciplinary, team-taught modern Jewish and European history class; a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to develop a Torah Sheb'al Peh (rabbinics) curriculum that intersected with the humanities at multiple points; a language immersion initiative that made it possible to use, or adapt, Israeli-produced materials in science, math, and social studies. But these were all short-lived, and the energy and effort expended to try to make the interdisciplinary focus happen, and in non-superficial ways, were so extraordinary as to discourage continuity or follow-up.

It reached the point, after a few years, that I began to claim that I had recanted my doctoral work, that I no longer believed that integration of Jewish and general studies was central to the work of schools, or that structuralist analysis bore any relevance whatsoever to the real work of real schools in real time. The key to exemplary Jewish day schooling, I argued, lay in continuously improving the curriculum and teaching of each discipline unto itself, which was so time-intensive a pursuit that schools that seriously engaged in it would never get around to bringing the subject matter of one discipline to bear on another. I reluctantly relegated my dissertation to the scrapheap of impressive theories with no practical uses whatsoever.

#### A Theory of Practice

In 1995-96, the year preceding the opening of the Solomon Schechter School of Manhattan, I began planning. To me, in addition to recruiting students and hiring teachers, this meant articulating an educational philosophy and core policies and practices that would shape the school, its curriculum, and its culture. I was convinced that the more coherent and compelling the ideas were, the more consistent the implementation, and the more unified the school, would be.

I did not realize it at the time, but I was, in effect, taking the next step on my lifelong journey towards the integration of Jewish and general studies. "Coherent," "consistent," and "unified" were closely associated with "integrated"!

Here are the ideas and practices established in the early years that, it now strikes me, have been instrumental in promoting a new type of integration ever since:

1. Active learning - Children were to be the "workers," and

teachers the guides, observers, and supporters, in every subject area in every grade, nearly all the time.

2. Constructivism - The specific form that the active learning would take made use of a design process called constructivism, which, we discovered over the years, consists of six elements:

- an open-ended, generative activity or assignment;
- beginning from, and building upon, students' prior experience and knowledge;
- promoting students' questioning, and finding ways to enable them to grapple with their own questions;
- working in groups to facilitate students' learning from each other;
- culminating activities that are themselves an authentic assessment of learning, because they generate and promote further learning rather than interrupting or arresting it; and
- reflection on the process of learning, so that past learning can be maximized and future learning made more effective.

3. Rigor and play - Children were to master the full range of academic skills, including not only basic reading, writing, and arithmetic, but also advanced deductive and inferential reasoning. At the same time, their creative faculties would be developed, as they learned to see and hear sensitively, think figuratively as well as literally, appreciate tension and paradox, and express themselves powerfully.

4. Individualized learning - Children's uniqueness as learners would be recognized by teachers in their attention to each child's interests, readiness, and learning style. We've since learned to refer to this approach as differentiation.

5. Menschlichkeit - Kindness and caring would be at the forefront of our practice. Teachers would model it in their interactions with children and other adults, and children would be helped to live up to high moral standards at all times.

6. Teachers as generalists - Teachers would be hired not as Jewish Studies or general studies teachers, not as Hebrew or English specialists, but to teach all subjects, Jewish and general studies, English and Hebrew, across the curriculum.

With these common understandings at the core, the foundation of a new paradigm of integrating Jewish and general studies had been laid.

A Paradigm Shift

On this model, classrooms look similar; teaching looks similar; learning looks similar. From class to class, grade to grade, subject to subject, there is an organic consistency across many of the key elements of culture and practice. Writing in second grade is very similar to writing in fourth grade, and kindergarten, and eighth grade; it is also similar to writing in Hebrew. Theme inquiry in fifth grade resembles theme inquiry in first grade and in seventh grade, but it also parallels the learning process in Jewish holidays and Jewish history. Reading is like reading, but also like Torah; math is like math, but also like Talmud.

Not only is the subject matter content consistent across disciplines. In addition, the skills, habits of mind, and attitudes that characterize learning at Schechter Manhattan are evident in multiple subject areas and in many grade levels. For example:

- Content - Though Martin Luther King's career and its meaning are studied separately from the meaning and personal significance of particular prayers, they come together when, at a Martin Luther King Day assembly, a teacher pauses before the t'filah begins and asks students to think during their t'filah about the themes of individual b'rachot of the Amidah and identify those that relate to themes of the day.
- Skills - In humanities, students write compare-and-contrast essays about two articles of clothing; in Torah, they write compare-and-contrast essays about two of the ten plagues.
- Habits of mind - Students learn that, whenever they make a claim, they need to support it with evidence. In writing literary essays, they use quotations to support their arguments; in Talmud, they and their chevruta (study partner) point to the same phrase or passage within a text when they are explaining their ideas.
- Attitudes - Students learn to appreciate that there can be more than one good answer to a question, more than one correct way of solving a problem, more than one effective way of expressing an idea. In Torah, math, and writing, they are taught that openness to the alternate approaches suggested by classmates often results in their own new insights and more powerful learning.

I'm now coming to a new understanding of the integration of Jewish and general studies. As a graduate student, I was right to critique the prevailing content-based model of integration, but I made the mistake of trying to replace it with a more complex and nuanced content-based model. This proved even more elusive than the previous version because it was more dependent than ever on a flash of insight from a virtuoso educator, followed by a heavy investment of schools' scarcest commodities, teachers' time and energy, to plan and implement

it.

A new insight into integrating Jewish and general studies seems to be emerging from many years of practice at Schechter Manhattan, namely that the real alternative to a content-based model of integration is a systems model. By systems model, I mean to claim that schools are complex, interdependent wholes whose parts stand in dynamic relationship to each other, and not collections of parts (e.g., subject areas, departments) that can productively be worked on in isolation.

When a school takes a holistic view of its core ideas and its practices of teaching and learning, develops them with care, and applies them systematically and consistently, the unity of the various disciplines becomes hard-wired within its culture, its signature pedagogies, and its processes. The integration doesn't come effortlessly, to be sure, but the energies that are expended go to developing the school-wide vision, philosophy, policies, and practices that are, in their own right, the hallmarks of excellent education. In other words, the heavy lifting goes into the whole of the school, not any of its separate parts, and decidedly not the spaces in between the parts; into the meat and potatoes, not the icing on the cake. The signature pedagogies and processes - the unity of approaches to teaching content, skills, habits of mind, and attitudes - then emerge of their own accord from shared vision and values. Effective, pervasive integration of Jewish and general studies comes as the byproduct of good systems thinking and planning, not as a separate, independent pursuit.

## Clips from the Classroom

On Friday, March 7th parents, grandparents, and friends joined Schechter Manhattan students at the Divisional Kabbalat Shabbat ceremonies held for the Lower Elementary, Upper Elementary, and Middle School divisions. (Some guests even joined the Mishe Mishe line, singing their way through the halls!)



A truly unique cast of characters showed up for our school-wide Megillah reading and Purim carnival!



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