



# Lev Ha'inyan / לב העניין

"The Heart of the Matter"  
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Commentary on issues in Jewish Education by Schechter Manhattan's Head of School  
**Dr. Steven C. Lorch**

December 2007 / Kislev - Tevet 5768

Vol. 1 Number 4

## Highlights

**December 20 -  
Fifth Grade Siddur  
Ceremony**

**December 24-31 -  
Winter Break**

**January 2 -  
Classes Resume**

**January 11 -  
Divisional Kabbalat  
Shabbat**

**&  
READ 2008**

**January 12 -  
Kosher Wine and  
Spirit  
Tasting and Dinner**

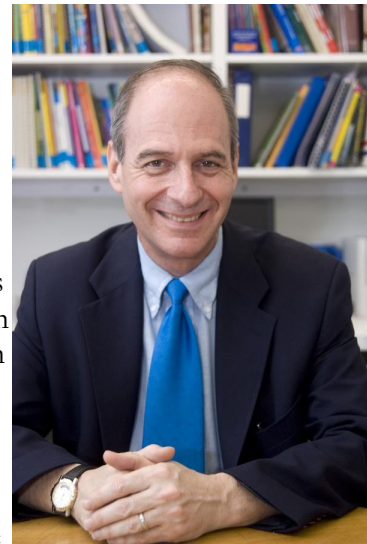
## Back to First Principles

by: Dr. Steven C. Lorch

It's the middle of admissions season, and I'm finding that parents are asking me more often this year than I can recall in the past to articulate what my vision was as I worked to establish this school. Having been thus prompted on multiple occasions to share my story in private, it occurs to me that this is not a story that I can recall having shared publicly.

Many of the key ideas that animate the Solomon Schechter School of Manhattan are the product of the 15 years I had spent prior to signing on to this project, all in Jewish day high schools as the head of school. I had extensive firsthand knowledge about what my former high school students were lacking, what they were not able to do when they arrived from their respective elementary schools. All I needed was to give myself permission to imagine what an elementary school might look like if it were not only to teach what quality elementary schools already teach well, but also to nurture the many intellectual and personal qualities that students in my high school would have benefited from, but lacked. Having longed for students with a particular set of attitudes, dispositions, and skills, and having despaired so often for so long, I found it relatively easy to conjure up what qualities Schechter Manhattan would need to inculcate.

In the pages that follow, I review, in brief, some of the key qualities that I hoped Schechter Manhattan graduates would exhibit - and what these desired outcomes would mean for a kindergarten education, as well as in eighth, or even ninth, grade.





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Parents'  
Association



**Kosher Wine &  
Spirit  
Tasting &  
Dinner**



Saturday  
January 12th  
7:00 pm

Lotus Space  
122 West 26th  
Street

For information contact  
Lisa Stubbs at  
[communications@sssm.org](mailto:communications@sssm.org)

For  
Information  
about our  
Application  
Process

## Habits of Mind

The first key defect that I had found over the years among my entering ninth graders was their expectation that it was the teacher's job to make the learning happen. So long as teachers told them exactly what to do or read, helpfully answered all questions, and reconciled discrepancies, they were willing, skillful, and often prodigious learners. However, as a general rule, as soon as a teacher would ask them to take initiative in defining the learning task, or in finding resources with which to carry out a task, or to take a stand on a debatable point and marshal evidence in support of their position, nearly every student became virtually paralyzed, apparently clueless as to how to proceed. Only by eliminating uncertainty and explicitly prescribing the process, the content, and the product of the learning could a teacher overcome students' profound resistance and enable them to resume learning.

(There are three reasons that student-directed learning was important to me as a high school head: first, as a pragmatic consideration, resourceful and independent learners would be better prepared for college, would tend to succeed there, and would pave the way for more graduates to be admitted. In addition, because active learners tend to be more interested in the learning and excited about the ideas, their learning is more memorable and remains more accessible to them for longer. Finally, because enthusiastic learners are less focused on grades and competition and more likely to engage in learning activities outside of class that go beyond the teacher's expectations, the classroom and student culture would be more productive and wholesome.)

I therefore resolved that, at Schechter Manhattan, children would be socialized from the very outset of kindergarten into being completely comfortable in finding their own way in independent and small-group learning tasks. That's why, for example, students begin to present their work to their classmates during author's chair, and the children in the audience learn to listen and ask appropriate questions; it's also why theme study is always guided by students' prior knowledge and interests, through KWL (what we **K**now; what we **W**ant to know; and - at the end of the learning process - what we have **L**earned).

Building upon the early experiences with active and resourceful learning, students are given more and more responsibility for their learning with each passing year. By the time they reach the middle school, our older students are highly accomplished at presenting exhibitions and other extended projects and poised when fielding difficult questions; they are also able to work their way independently or in small groups through dense, abstruse texts (the Federalist Papers, the *Talmud*, Shakespeare) and other complex learning tasks (quadratic equations, open-ended science experiments, extended artist studies) for extended periods of time.

Having a reasonably clear sense even before the school opened its doors that the academic preparation for high school that students

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are most in need of includes, prominently, cultivating them as textpeople has enabled us to identify what the milestones on this journey look like from the very beginning of kindergarten through the very end of eighth grade, and at every other step along the way.

### Habits of Heart

The high schools in which I worked, just like nearly every other high school I'm acquainted with, were challenging places for young people to find their way socially and emotionally. For a variety of reasons, many students tended not to feel particularly safe or accepted. There was no system set up to enable teachers to really know their students as people, and students to really know their teachers. More often than not, students tended to create relatively rigid cliques and hierarchies with which to regulate and constrain student-to-student interactions. Often the schools created systems and policies that promoted competition over scarce rewards. Students with a strong sense of self and sense of belonging managed to get through without feeling significant alienation, but most didn't.

In fact, even in elementary schools, the expressive tone is not compassionate and empathetic, or at least not consistently so. As a high school principal, I had the sense that students who had been socialized in elementary school environments that were not morally attuned arrived in high school with the expectation that the school would not take an interest in their emotional needs, much less meet them. In other words, if students had not grown up in a community that promoted and valued community and interpersonal kindness even above education, it was unlikely that they would seek out community and belonging once they reached high school and become part of the solution.

I therefore resolved that, at Schechter Manhattan, *menschlichkeit* would be a fundamental value and cultural commonplace at every level. To promote a consistent culture of kindness and supportiveness, the first key, I decided, is to hire only *mensch*; next comes promoting continuous conversation and incidental learning among the faculty about the expressive tone of the classroom and moral sensitivity. It also helps when, throughout the elementary divisions, there are two co-teachers per class who model *menschlichkeit* not only in their interactions with students, but also and especially through their consistently generous and supportive interactions with each other. Finally, teachers put the principle "*Derech eretz kadmah l'Torah* (Moral behavior is a precondition to learning)" into practice, both by beginning the school year establishing routines and creating community and by dropping all learning whenever a breach of community occurs and attending to the need for community building as an urgent priority.

In kindergarten, children are inducted into the culture of compassion in many ways, including working together in pairs and groups every day for much of the time, being recognized for everyday acts of kindness within class and school-wide, and learning to resolve conflicts by talking things out with each other. By the

time students reach middle school, the peer group is the primary force for promoting and enforcing *menschlichkeit* among themselves, and the teachers play more of a support role in reminding students in the relatively rare cases in which the community culture is challenged.

Students socialized in this school culture will be forces for community, connection, and kindness in their high schools - precisely the kind of students I, as a principal, would have wanted to have in significant numbers in my high schools.

### Habits of Soul

High school students' engagement in prayer is a rare phenomenon. Most often one sees a handful of students for whom the experience is meaningful, while the others are either quietly tuned out, or actively disrupting or showing disrespect to the sacred time and space during the *t'filah* session. This was certainly my experience in the high schools I led; it - what to do about daily prayer, and how to make it more tolerable - continues to be one of the hottest and most consistent topics of conversation among heads and Jewish Studies directors of high schools around the country.

The near-consensus seems to be that something happens to children around the time they enter middle school, at which point they become contrarian. From then on, it is next to impossible to restore the enthusiasm toward prayer that the same students experienced as young children.

We have a different theory of action about *t'filah*. The crisis in *t'filah* begins, we think, in kindergarten, but, if skillfully addressed then and for the next few years, there will be occasional challenges in later years, but not a crisis. To our mind, the widely held view that all is well during the elementary years is based on a misconception about child development. In elementary school, the critical developmental challenge and milestone is to develop a sense of competence in mastering adult-like tasks. This is why children will comply with *t'filah* during the elementary years, because the rote recitation is one way to demonstrate competence. In middle school and high school, the developmental focus shifts to clarifying one's identity, which is why, if *t'filah* has been a rote, meaningless performance until that point, it will be very difficult to win over high school students who are already turned off.

Instead, we believe that the antidote to adolescent antipathy toward *t'filah* lies in the kindergarten program. The very outset of one's *t'filah* career is the time to start presenting prayer as a source of spiritual truths, personal significance, and active engagement. With a consistent emphasis on these themes, students will tend to internalize the attitude that *t'filah* is a very meaningful activity for them, which will make it much harder for them to feel alienated from it or to rebel against it during high school.

We therefore resolved to encourage kindergarten children to engage

in theological discussion about the meaning of each new prayer as they were learning it as part of every prayer service, and to record the outcome of their discussion - their interpretation - in the class *siddur*. Because of children's natural affinity for big questions at that age, they take to these discussions, and the artistic representations of their interpretations, with great enthusiasm.

This experience of theological discussion as a complement to the recitation of *t'filah*, and the recording of students' contributions and ideas as artistic or verbal commentary, continues with only minor, age-appropriate adaptations, all the way through eighth grade. By the time students reach the middle school, they are active and often animated participants in both the recitation and the discussion of prayer - most unlike the high school students at my previous schools and other Jewish day schools.

Schechter Manhattan's *t'filah* program developed from the very beginning with a conscious eye toward the high school student we intended to produce - engaged, thoughtful, and spiritually attuned. Because that's how they were in kindergarten, that's how they continue in the middle school, and, we're already seeing from our first alumni classes, that's how they are when they reach high school, as well.

### Conclusion

In our leadership team, we have an expression we use as shorthand for this type of planning, drawn from the *L'cha Dodi* prayer from the Friday evening liturgy: "*Sof ma'aseh b'machshavah t'chilah* (The final step is already anticipated in the initial plan)." Having a good sense of our students' destination has enabled us to anticipate the educational challenges they would face and to develop curriculum and educational approaches to ameliorate those challenges. Whether in their academic, social-emotional, or spiritual lives, planning backwards from the desired end product has produced a consistency of approach that is already standing the test of time.

## Clips from the Classroom



Parents, grandparents, teachers, and friends joined all of Schechter Manhattan's students in making a joyful noise at this year's Family Zimriyah and Chanukah Celebration on December 12th!



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