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## LEARNING IN THE TIME OF COVID-19: CHALLENGES, LESSONS, AND THE FUTURE OF JEWISH EDUCATION

We asked expert educators to provide us with insights into the future of Jewish education as we emerge from the pandemic, using the following questions as a guide: 1) Has the pandemic changed our view of what Jewish day schools should be doing? 2) What innovations should be continued going forward? What are the opportunities and challenges in allowing a permanent distance learning option? 3) Are children behind as a result of the pandemic? 4) How has the pandemic changed the way we view the role of the teacher outside of the classroom?

### Rabbi Seth Grauer

#### Rosh Yeshiva and Head of School

*Bnei Akiva Schools of Toronto*

One of the most common questions educators are asked these days is: to what extent will the educational changes and systems put in place during the pandemic continue in a non-pandemic world? There are undoubtedly many lessons we will learn from these last 12 months (and counting), and schools of all types

will certainly see lasting changes as a result of the COVID changes forced upon us. I believe one incredible lesson is that our day school systems cannot effectively be replaced with an online educational system without accepting massive trade-offs and significant compromises.

Our children thrive and succeed through human contact. *Chavruta learning, shiurim, tisches, chagigot, shabbatonim* and so much more are the lifeblood of our yeshivot and day schools, and these simply

cannot be replaced virtually. Is it possible to combine synchronous and asynchronous lessons in an effective way whereby math and science can be taught? Absolutely.

Is this combination of videos, Zooms, independent learning, and home schooling effective for all? No way.

Some students have thrived academically within an online world; however, many students who struggle academically have found the current setup in an online educationally

independent world difficult. Students with executive functioning challenges have had a very hard time adapting even with support. While perhaps applicable to a greater extent in elementary grades, parents have had a very hard time keeping up with the new demands being placed upon them. Yet what makes our yeshivot and day schools unique is the massive emphasis on social emotional well being and religious growth — both of which are severely compromised in an online world.

When a rebbe cannot *daven* with his talmidim and female religious role models cannot have meaningful discussions in person without masks with their talmidot, something significant is lost. High school is an incredibly complicated time in the life of an adolescent/emerging adult, and personal, sincere support is simply not the same online.

Are students behind as a result of the pandemic? They are not necessarily academically behind. This, of course, depends on how effective the school was at transitioning to an online educational system. However, I would argue that students are behind religiously, socially, and emotionally, and that is of much greater concern. It might take years before we truly know the answer and fully recognize the impact this period had on our students.

The pandemic has highlighted for day schools that the role of the teacher is so much greater than being a supplier of knowledge or even a trainer of skills. I once asked my rebbe, Rav Aaron Lichtenstein, what the role of a teacher is. Rav Lichtenstein responded (paraphrasing): A teacher has three primary responsibilities: 1) To teach the material within the curriculum;

2) To help his/her students learn the skills necessary to be able to learn on their own; and 3) To imbue within his/her students a love of learning. And (said Rav Lichtenstein) their level of importance is in reverse order!

In an online world, No.1 is relatively easy and when done properly, No. 2 can be achieved with a great deal of success as well, but the real challenge that so many of my colleagues have recognized is excelling at No. 3.

Let us all hope and pray that we can return to our schools to continue to teach and learn in person, face to face and without barriers, as quickly as possible.

## **Mrs. Elisheva Kaminetsky**

### **Principal, Judaic Studies**

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The COVID-19 pandemic has forced us all to recalibrate and approach things in new ways. Fault lines in our relationships and institutions have been highlighted and magnified. At the same time, we have learned how to compensate for what we don't have and have shown strength and resilience that we didn't know we possessed. There are many things in our lives that we never considered as privileges or opportunities, like hugging a grandparent or going on a school trip, that we no longer take for granted.

Many years ago, while attending a PD (professional development) session about "flipped classrooms" [a type of blended learning where students are introduced to content at home and practice working through it at school], a colleague turned to me and said, "I've always believed, that

while many areas of life would one day be taken over by machines and computers, we as educators were safe, that we were necessary, and need to be physically present to do our jobs. But now, listening to this presentation on 'flipped classrooms,' I wonder if we, too, will someday be replaced by computers." Over the past year, the learning in many of our schools has continued seamlessly despite the pandemic. We are so thankful for the blessing of technology that has allowed students to connect with teachers remotely. At the same time, person-to-person direct instruction has become more precious than ever, proving that the relationship between teacher and student is of paramount importance in education.

Educating the whole child has long been the mission of our Jewish day schools. As educators, we nurture the social, emotional, religious, and intellectual growth of each child. We care, not just about what our students know, but about how they feel and how they connect to their learning. We look to ignite their passions and help them nurture their own relationships with Hashem, with Torah, and with the community. Role modeling and connections to mentors have proven to be among the greatest influences in the development of a child. For eight to ten hours a day, and many evenings and weekends, we partner with parents in the true fashion described by Chazal, "*talmidim k'banim*" (students are like our children).

During the current COVID crisis, in keeping with our dedication and commitment to being in touch with and supporting the social-emotional needs of our students, we've acquired new tools to assist in

navigating these difficult times. By using our classrooms and studies to allow students to reflect and share their feelings about what they are learning and experiencing, students create meaning and can connect the learning to their lives. Now more than ever when students and teachers come to school, whether in person or on Zoom, we are aware of the undercurrent of anxiety, tension, inability to rely on health, finances, summer plans, and even plans for the next day. We have become acutely aware of what it means for a child to go to school while their parents are sitting shiva. After all, in some cases, they are Zooming into school from a room right next to where the mourners are sitting.

We have seen the incredible need for students to socialize and connect in a deep and meaningful way with

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their teachers and their peers, and we, at school, look to compensate for the toll that social distancing has taken on students' ability to do so. As educators, we must always remind ourselves that, even when things are "normal," each student is a world of their own. When they arrive in our classrooms, they each bring their own set of emotions and life circumstances with them.

The same applies to our teachers, of course, many of whom are working parents and have always faced the age-old juggling act of balancing home and work. During the COVID-19 pandemic, they are confronted with new home and school obligations and stressors; sometimes giving a Zoom lesson in the same room with their own young children who are taking their own Zoom classes. We've implemented a periodic teacher survey to take the pulse of our teachers. This includes "check-ins" to help gauge how they're doing; a place to share concerns, struggles, and successes; and a culture of care and concern for not only the whole child, but for the whole teacher as well. Teachers have joined faculty-led book clubs, seminars on self-care, and school-sponsored cooking demos to help foster connection among the staff as we support each other during these times.

Additionally, our teachers have become experts in Zoom technology and in making distance learning engaging. In post-pandemic days, these tools can be transferred to the classroom and will also give students who are out of school for medical reasons to continue to have access to their learning in meaningful ways. In addition, in previous years, teachers have offered extra help to students

by phone or email; now students can benefit from math tutoring, answering Chumash questions, and meeting with guidance counselors in the evenings on Zoom, providing a more authentic meeting experience.

Before this crisis, we, as educators, were not aware of the eagerness with which students yearned to be in school, face to face, with their friends and teachers. In all probability, neither were the students themselves! This enthusiasm motivates us to take advantage of every minute we have together, fostering relationships that will impact our young people for a lifetime. As educators, we are vital links in the transmission of our Mesorah and we are grateful for every day that we are able to continue connecting to our students in a meaningful way.

## **Rabbi Jonathan Knapp**

### **Head of School**

*Yavneh Academy, Paramus, NJ*

*L'Zecher Nishmas Yisrael Yaakov ben Dov v'Zlata, Jack Tarzik, whose first yahrzeit is 26 Nissan. Jack was a pioneer in the field of informal Jewish education and mentor to many aspiring educators. I, and many others, sorely miss his advice and presence.*

To a large extent, it feels premature to speak about lessons we can derive and apply in a post-COVID world. Our community has endured, and continues to experience, tremendous suffering including loss of life, illness, disruption of routine, frayed relationships, loss of parnassah and increased anxiety, among other issues. We continue to daven, fervently, that people should be spared any further



illness and that Hashem should send refuah and nechama to those in need.

While it may be too early to determine definitively the long-term takeaways from this time, schools are dynamic institutions and have already implemented many adjustments, some of which will likely remain in a post pandemic world.

One of the true successes over the past several months has been the ability of our yeshivot to provide in-school instruction while preserving public health. This commitment to maintain live instruction has given our students the education and socialization they desperately crave and deserve.

### **The Pandemic and Jewish Education**

While Jewish day schools have always served as essential resources for the broader community, the pandemic has thrust some of the normal roles of schools — such as teaching “soft skills” — into higher visibility.

Over the past several years, schools have increased their attention to developing social and emotional skills in our children. Teaching empathy, grit, and resilience have emerged as key components of a vibrant day school curriculum. At Yavneh Academy, we have designated staff members to develop our curriculum and focus on these essential life skills. These educators support our main classroom teachers in working with our students throughout the day, focusing on learning how to recognize emotions, navigating conflict, and building empathy. In the midst of this pandemic, we are seeing a great need for these skills. We are finding that those children who can draw on these attributes are better equipped to navigate these challenging times.

Indeed, the COVID pandemic has elevated this focus on developing emotional skills in children to another level. It has sharpened the need for schools to care for the whole child, and even the whole family.

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Building emunah in our students is another crucially important priority. How often do we talk about God with our children, in school or at home? Explicitly focusing on finding emunah-shaping opportunities to engage our students has already proven highly beneficial. Our school has incorporated this focus at every grade level with age-appropriate conversations. For the first ten weeks of this year, I engaged our 8th graders with weekly emunah discussions. We explored various ways to grow

our emunah, ranging from exploring Hashem’s amazing world to focusing on tefillah, looking for evidence of Hashem’s hand in our daily lives, and studying Chumash. Based on the subsequent comments and conversations, I could tell that some of the students really took to particular ideas that most resonated with them personally.

### **Innovations Going Forward**

Utilizing Zoom has opened up new vistas for parental engagement, giving parents the availability of using Zoom for school-related conferences, meetings, workshops, and more. It has also provided increased opportunities for multigenerational participation in milestone events, Erev Shabbat programming, special visitor days, Siddur celebrations, and other programs. While we strive to maintain that face-to-face relationship, Zoom has given our students opportunities to connect with presenters, educators, and experiences from those all around the world. Furthermore, for children who are out of school due to long-term illness, Zooming into class can be life-changing for staying connected.

In addition, like many schools, we have created multiple minyanim for social distancing and contact tracing purposes. These smaller davening experiences have been encouraging and inspiring. More students can participate. It feels that everyone’s participation matters! These small venues also create new educational opportunities and provide chances to integrate some of the emunah concepts mentioned earlier.

This challenging time has forced us to look at some of our most beautiful religious traditions, like bar and bat mitzvah celebrations, unpack them to their simplest forms, and re-sanctify

them with a focus on their actual religious meaning. We may imagine that we want to revert to "normal" as the pandemic abates, but we will need to pause before rushing back into what once was. I believe that the pandemic has broken various cycles that we would not otherwise have thought to disrupt. The same would apply to other school programs and events.

One thing remains abundantly clear: in-school education is essential and indispensable, especially for our youngest learners. There is simply no replacement for that experience long term.

### **Are Children Behind?**

Originally, there was much fear and concern about the potential academic impact of COVID-19 on our students. Baruch Hashem, we haven't seen it. This is directly attributable to the heroic efforts of our teachers! Teachers have proven to be absolutely essential, and the way they have faced the herculean challenges of this pandemic continues to amaze me. When history looks back on this time period, along with the extraordinary

heroic work of doctors, nurses, medical professionals, and other front-line workers, we will recognize the incredible dedication and significant sacrifices made by our day school teachers.

At Yavneh, through the dedicated efforts of our parent body, we created a volunteer tutoring program that has stepped in to fill the void for particular students. This program has proven to be mutually beneficial, since many retired teachers or others who find themselves with extra time on their hands feel fulfilled and invigorated by making a meaningful difference in the life of a child. Many adults also lost their sense of routine and this has filled a void for many of them as well.

For schools that have managed to remain open during the 2020–2021 school year, it doesn't seem that our students are behind in their work. Curriculum-wise, they have probably had more class than usual since other forms of programming have been diminished. Eventually, there will be standardized measures and metrics to further confirm these

assumptions and early findings. The question might be more relevant in the affective realm: How has the stress of quarantines, Zooming, worrying, etc. impacted our children? In the early childhood years, children's learning and development is centered around play. Those skills are harder to measure, and the potential impact will take longer to determine.

### **The Role of Teachers Outside the Classroom**

When we began teaching on Zoom in the spring of 2020, the inability to connect with kids outside of class was an enormous challenge. Even while we were teaching them, we lost out on the hallways, lunchroom, and playground conversations. All those opportunities and connections help form a foundation for what we do in the classroom. But our teachers have learned to adjust. They have pivoted, developing brilliant new ways of fostering the teacher-student relationship. We know as educators that developing that connection is the key to learning. With our smiles covered, or faces behind screens at



times, teachers have learned other nonverbal cues of encouragement and ways to show their belief in their students. The pandemic has placed teachers in a role where they need to check in and connect with kids more outside of the classroom. They care about the social and emotional growth of the children and how they are doing spiritually. As we applaud and express admiration for our teachers, it is vitally important that we continue to check in and monitor the impact of the pandemic on our faculty, both emotionally and physically. This should be done both on an organizational level as well as on an individual level.

Rabbi Soloveitchik, in his powerful *Fate and Destiny* (translated from the Hebrew *Kol Dodi Dofek*), describes the approach and philosophy of a person of destiny. According to the Rav, when such a person is confronted with suffering and evil, that person, “recognizes the world as it is and does not wish to use harmonistic formulas in order to gloss over and conceal evil. The man of destiny is highly realistic and does not flinch from confronting evil face to face.” Rather, the Rav explains, this person acknowledges the existence of pain and suffering in the world. “Evil exists, and I will neither deny it or camouflage it . . . I ask one simple question: **What** must the sufferer do so that he may live through his suffering?”

The Rav famously differentiates between **what** and **why**. “We do not inquire about the hidden ways of the Almighty, but, rather, about the path wherein man shall walk when suffering strikes. We ask neither about the cause of evil nor about its purpose, but, rather, about how it might be mended and elevated. How shall a

person act in a time of trouble? **What** ought a man to do so that he not perish in his affiliations?” Our schools have responded to this crisis with clarity, conviction, and resolve.

Overall, I am very encouraged and optimistic about where our students are today. Many are flourishing. They realize with renewed enthusiasm how much they love being in school! At the same time, those who are struggling need more support and attention than before and schools are doing their best, with partnership from parents who are also balancing new challenges, to fill those needs.

## Dr. Laya Salomon

### Associate Professor

*Yeshiva University's Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration*

### The Pandemic and Jewish Education

More than changing our views of what day schools should be, COVID-19 has changed our understanding of what day schools are, and have always been, doing.

This reminds me of the Jewish understanding of *teva* (nature) and *nes* (miracle). While all of God’s creations are miraculous and wondrous, the wonder becomes habitual when we observe it on a regular basis. It’s when we experience something that defies everyday nature — the unique waterfall, the near-death escape — that we recognize the remarkability and immenseness of all that surrounds us.

Schools have always been working valiantly to tend to nearly every aspect of their students’ growth and development, and we’ve become

accustomed to that. When the pandemic hit and we were all thrown into disarray and our children were home from school for a few months, we realized how much day schools do and how much we need them to nurture our children’s academic, social, and spiritual selves.

One important aspect of the educational experience that has been highlighted during the pandemic is the value of parental partnership. We as parents have been forced partners in our children’s education, and while there were many ugly parts of the experience, an invested interest in, and need to know about what our children were learning and doing, ensued. In some respects, despite the distance, we got to know our children’s teachers better than ever. Schools have operated in partnership with parents long before the pandemic, and to varying degrees. This experience gave both stakeholders — parents and schools — an opportunity to consider how meaningful those partnership were and what aspects of the partnership could be deepened even more.

### Innovations Going Forward

Another benefit: when the limitations of learning surfaced, so did the possibilities for learning. When remote instruction became the norm, we experienced educational opportunities that we never thought possible. Remarkably, without a physical school to attend, learning continued and teachers prepared lessons where students were collaborative, engaged and on-task. We became aware that a deliberate and planned system of learning can happen outside the schoolhouse as well, and I believe this realization will be a mainstay in the future.



Still, there is so much to gain from the socialization, interactivity, collaboration, and individualization provided by in-person instruction. Parents who have traditionally sent their children to brick-and-mortar buildings, and have benefitted from that experience, are certainly not looking to replace it entirely.

I believe the success of distance learning signals a few other considerations for Jewish schools, such as:

- What else can technology do to enhance students learning? We didn't conceive of the possibility until we were forced to; what can we possibly conceive of without being forced?
- Our educational systems are formed by location, since schools are generally comprised of children within a given mile radius. How can we include distant students into our Jewish educational system? What can we do better, and do more, to unite learners across the globe? We always say the Jewish world is a small one and I would welcome the opportunity to make it even smaller.

### **Are Children Behind?**

While many say that children are behind as the result of the pandemic, I don't think this is the case, and most of the school leaders I've spoken with have concurred. While the 2020–2021 academic year began with some lag in learning and the need to recalibrate, for the most part, children have caught up. Many schools prioritized learning goals well by focusing on fundamentals, such as reading and writing skills, and putting forth extra efforts to ensure students were reaching benchmarks in these areas. Literacy skills are key, since they open pathways to all forms of learning,

including independent learning that may be needed to catch up.

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### **The Role of Teachers Outside the Classroom**

I think and hope that the pandemic led us to blur the lines a bit between “inside” and “outside” the classroom, so that what was traditionally seen as “outside” the classroom has now been invited “inside.” Education should have never been about rigid lesson plans and mass dissemination of knowledge to all students equally. Connecting to a child's inner life and family life — understanding their preferences, talents, oddities, and personal challenges — is part of educating the child. Caring, loving, and engaging with all aspects of a child is not a role relegated to outside the classroom. The teacher's primary role is in the classroom, and the uniqueness that each child brings into that learning sphere becomes part of

the process of educating him or her. I think the pandemic highlighted this educational truth immensely.

More important, I think the pandemic changed the way we view “the teacher.” The extent to which our children felt nurtured, safe, and cared for during the most tumultuous months depended largely on our teachers, and nearly all of them rose to the occasion. And as we continue to celebrate our teachers, I think it's imperative that our newfound appreciation comes with much more than niceties and pats on the back. There needs to be a change within, and by that I refer to a change within ourselves and within our community. A change within ourselves is a call for introspection in how we perceive and relate to Jewish day school educators. Do we genuinely value their work? Do we recognize the nobility of the profession? Would we encourage our own children if they were to choose this career? As a community, we need to herald the work of the Jewish educators who are entrusted with shaping the future of our children. Teaching is complex and sophisticated work. The multi-faceted and delicate nature of the job points to the need to identify individuals who are best suited for it. Those who are bright, skilled, committed, and deeply caring belong in the field of chinuch, and they will be looking to our community for encouragement and support. We can demonstrate that support through our voices, through our resources, and through our genuine, united efforts at ennobling the field of Jewish education.