



"I will gather the sheaves of wheat..."
 BOOK OF RUTH 2:2
 ...ואלקטה בשבלים...
 מגילת רות ב.ב.

שבלי שכטר

SHIBBOLEY SCHECHTER

A GATHERING OF IDEAS FOR LAY AND PROFESSIONAL LEADERS

Volume 29, Issue 1

Winter 2008

Spiritual and Spirited Leadership: Leading from the Inside Out.

Heads of School are challenged to be both the calm center at the heart of the school, as well as the inspiring/role model/motivating visionary who moves the school to ever higher levels of accomplishment. How do we find our own emotional peace and spiritual space while negotiating the needs and wants of others and the tremendous privileges and challenges of leadership?

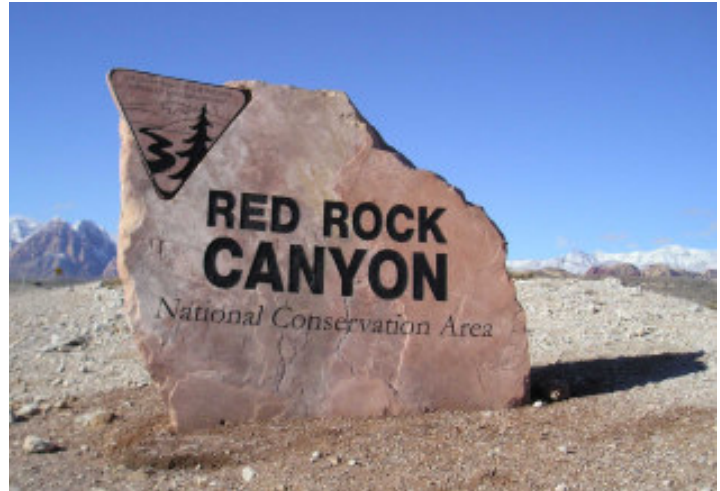
A particular need at this time is find ways to ensure that our schools will reflect and nurture those distinct elements that make them "Schechter" schools. This important challenge begins with school leaders.

The January 2008 Professionals Conference steps away from many of the topics ably covered by PEJE, NAIS and other associations (such as fundraising, marketing, etc.), and focuses on a journey that will help us awaken or strengthen our own spirituality and show us how we may do the same for our students, staff, parents, and lay leaders. We will be working within the specific niche that is particular to our Schechter schools, joining together in writing as a spiritual practice, *tefillah* and reflective exercises, as well as furthering curricular initiatives that relate to students' spiritual growth and religious development. The goals of this conference are both personal and professional.

We've chosen to travel to Las Vegas to support the newest school in the Schechter network in the fastest growing Jewish community in the country. There will be opportunities to visit the SSDS of Las Vegas, connect with professional peers from across North America, and learn with and from master teachers, both within and beyond the Schechter network. We are delighted that Saul Wachs, who has worked with Schechter educators for more than twenty-five years will be our onsite resource person for *tefillah*, and Merle Feld, a widely published poet, award-winning playwright, peace activist, and educator who has pioneered teaching writing as a spiritual practice, will serve as writer-in-residence.

This will be a rich, multi-layered and meaningful experience. Make sure to make your reservation soon!. ☐

Rabbi Jim Rogozen, Chairperson, SSDSA Professionals Council



Participants at the SSDSA Professionals Conference will visit Nevada's Red Rock Canyon to engage in reflection, *tefillah* and writing as a spiritual practice in a beautiful outdoor setting.

SSDSA Professionals Conference Spirited and Spiritual Leadership: Leading from the Inside Out

The Professional Conference will provide exciting opportunities for reflective writing and shared deliberations about how to lead your school to be a spiritual and sacred community.

Sunday, January 13 - Tuesday, January 15, 2008

Suncoast Hotel & Casino

9090 Alta Dr

Sessions and meals will take place at:

SSDS of Las Vegas,

Temple Beth Sholom, 10700 Havenwood Ln.

Las Vegas, Nevada 89145

In this Issue:

**Strategic Planning Then and Now* by Arnie Zar-Kessler

**One Schools' Strategic Planning Process* by Alex Paley



Strategic Planning for an Association of Schools

*“Strategic Planning is... an Oxymoron” ~Henry Mintzberg, *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning**

“If you want to give God a laugh, tell Him your future plans” (German Proverb)

By definition an association is a collection of interlocking relationships among schools with a commonality of purpose and shared challenges. Therefore, the primary purpose of an association is to create and sustain a network of stakeholders that advocate for their shared mission and pool their wisdom to address needs; being strategic means not just crafting a three or five year plan, but thinking and acting strategically in a continuing commitment to quality. When that happens there is true alignment between the needs of the member schools and the work of the association.

Jeffrey Moredock, Governance Counsel, National Association of Independent Schools and facilitator of the SSDSA Strategic Planning Retreat

Strategic Planning Then and Now: Specifying measurement, timelines and expected outcomes in 2007

A report from the SSDS of Greater Boston, MA.

Our school, the Solomon Schechter Day School of Greater Boston, recently completed a new strategic plan, dubbed ‘Zahav’ to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the school around the time of the ‘realization’ of the plan, early in the coming decade. The completion of this plan prompted us to unearth the remains of previous plans.

The prior plans touched on many similar broad goals – excellence of educational program, economic accessibility, upkeep and improvement of facilities, and effective communications. The planning committee who attached their names to these plans are all outstanding leaders of the school and the community. Nonetheless, significant differences can be detected from closer reading and comparison of the current plan and the prior ones.

These differences are less about the overall goals and directions of the plans, or the quality of the effort made. Rather the differences are about the language and orientation of the outcomes, and the processes that led up to them. Further, these differences reflect more about strategic planning in general than our school in particular. It appears that strategic planning – the blueprinting for change – is itself undergoing something of a change in our institutions, and in the wider community, as well.



Cheryl Finkel (Senior consultant, PEJE), Bob Abramson (Department of Education, USCJ) and Jane Taubenfeld Cohen (HoS, SASSDS, Norwood, MA) engage in a strategy planning exercise at the recent retreat of the SSDSA.

Strategic planning is a method for positioning an organization to take advantage of its future by capitalizing on its opportunities, addressing its challenges, and providing the kind of leadership that masters change. The benefits of this sort of planning are pretty obvious - an organization simply cannot know what it is doing and what it intends to do unless it periodically establishes and monitors its goals. Strategic planning enables people to influence the future. The very act of planning implies that schools are more than passive pawns in the hands of socioeconomic, demographic and other outside forces.

But these obvious benefits have always been at work. So, if there is a change in strategic planning (or at least in this one strategic plan), what is the evidence, and how can it be explained? And finally, we must ask – as we always do – is this sort of thing, this changing face of change – good for the Jews?

The contrast

What’s striking about what distinguishes our current plan and the prior plans are both the specificity of the outcomes indicated in the current plan, and the details as to how the plan is to be achieved.

The prior plans used phrases like “continue to work towards (curricular integration)”, “improve effectiveness (of math and science programs)”, “make maximal use (of technology)”, “articulate more clearly our goals (for spirituality)”, and “identify sources (of non-tuition revenue)” to articulate direction and set goals. Prior plans were not terribly specific about how the goals were to be achieved and measured, and the exact timelines to be followed in order for the plan to be realized.

While the current plan includes very similar overall goals – the development of a ‘virtuous cycle’ linking a professional learning community, outstanding educational experience, strong enrollment, and financial sustainability – it also stipulates certain initiatives that are intended to address the goals listed. These include “increase meeting time (launch in 2008)”, “increase non-parent Board representation (starting in 2007)”, “refine compensation system to pay at high end of

independent schools (start 2008, and realize by 2012)", and "faculty summer seminar (by 2009)."

Overall, the current plan has fewer goals and more initiatives noted to meet these goals. Each of these initiatives is further articulated in what are sometimes referred to as 'S.M.A.R.T.' goal-language. S.M.A.R.T. being an acronym for Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Responsibility noted, and Time-frame identified.

This approach to goal setting has led, almost seamlessly, into a series of annual school-wide objectives that have been used as the basis for the work of both the Board and the administration of the school. Indeed, we have 'rough cuts' of some of what might be on our school-wide objectives, with hoped-for outcomes, 'owners', and some sense of financial investment, as well. All, of course, are subject to review and modification, but overall, the school now has a plan of where it is going and how it is planning on getting there, through the remainder of the decade. In turn, the prospect of seeing the plan as something more than a document that languishes in a principal's bookcase, but actively informs everyone's work at the school, has energized the work of the key constituencies, including teachers, and has helped us better articulate our direction to our families and the wider community.

A more sophisticated approach

Thus, it appears that the difference between the current and prior plans is in the approach to articulating, and in effect, managing the change. From my vantage point, as Head of School, it is unequivocally clear that the difference is due to the increased sophistication of the lay leadership who worked tirelessly with the administration to formulate the process, and then the content of the plan. The Board leadership came with a great deal of experience in envisioning organizational change, in pulling together disparate voices, and especially in helping everyone understand the need for clarity, as a prime prerequisite for effective execution of the plan down the road.

These current lay leaders have generally grown up in an environment far, far different from those of prior generations of lay leaders. By my count, the committee that led the prior plan had—besides the school personnel—two people trained as lawyers, one trained as a doctor, two as social workers, one as an engineer, and two with MBA's. The current committee, in contrast, was smaller, and much more heavily weighted to individuals with MBA's. This likely reflects a wider trend in the Jewish community, where lay leadership historically has moved from merchants to 'businesspeople' in smaller corporations, to professionals, and now to managers in large corporations.

These current leaders have re-shaped the conversations about how our school might look in the future, holding us all to a more precise language of planning. And our school is not alone. The flourishing of dozens of consulting firms, publications and seminars to help schools more effectively plan are evidenced everywhere, not least of all on any simple Google search.

For example, the National Association of Elementary School Principals notes that, "Successful strategic planning for schools is grounded in certain beliefs, including:

- The planning process may be more important in effecting



Elaine Cohen represented the Schechter Association at the celebration of the opening of the new campus of the Chicagoland Jewish High School on September 30th.

positive change than the planning product.

- People in successful organizations place a few target goals on the horizon and adhere to guiding principles that point the way.
- A small group of staff members accepts the role of monitoring the plan's implementation.
- Strategic planning is not an isolated event, but rather one component of a reflective school culture that continually questions its purpose and effectiveness.
- The plan should be considered not as a rigid mandate, but rather as a path that can be modified by changing events, values, and learnings.
- The strategic plan is "the" plan for the school."

This brief outline reflects pretty closely the sort of process and outcome we followed in the most recent plan, and it reflects a growing sophistication in NAESP, as well. And this is not limited simply to strategic planning—management principles and practices are becoming mainstays of not-for-profits everywhere hoping to go 'from good to great'. Simply put, organizations everywhere are getting better-run, and sooner or later, schools—even Jewish Day Schools—will feel, and are feeling, the impact of that movement.

So, is it good for the Jews?

Re-stating the obvious, Jewish schools, and Jewish institutions at large are products of a people, a history and a tradition that has religious and cultural roots, different from those of business schools. Thus, there is ample reason to be concerned that the uniquely Jewish religious and cultural language may recede with the growth of a more articulate (and more effective) managerial language in our schools.

Likely more Heads are currently working with MBA's in their leadership, and the emphasis on 'metrics', or measurable outcomes (usually quantifiable outcomes) is one example of the sort of problems presented. We might buckle at this new language, and—again, for example, see the sacred mission of our schools as defying traditional measures. Nonetheless, we also recognize that better managed organizations tend to be

more successful organizations. And better planning is a critical element in good management. So how do we handle this wind of change in our institutions and perhaps in our roles as leaders?

The challenge for educational leaders might be in how to maintain a dialogue in which all parties are listening and learning – the MBA's growing in their sensitivity to the 'sacred tasks' of educating Jewish children, and the school folks taking notes on how to plan, assign, measure, and then re-assess. WE have to operate, as the tradition teaches us, to always be the learner, and to always be ready to be the teacher.

For if we believe that Jewish Day Schools are a solution to the contemporary challenge of Jewry, then we have to believe that it is probably a better situation if they are successful. We'd be foolish to not take advantage of tools that can increase the likelihood of our success, even if it comes from a world heretofore unfamiliar to us. □

Arnie Zar-Kessler, Head of School, SSDS of Greater Boston

One Schools' Strategic Planning Process

A report from Gerrard Berman Day School, Oakland, NJ

When I was asked to write an account of the process of developing our Strategic Plan (SP), I was initially somewhat hesitant. I wasn't sure that the sharing of our school's process could impart any practical lessons to others. Our plan as of today is on a good trajectory but is by no means fully implemented. However, upon reconsidering this concern, I decided that there may be some nuggets that could be garnered from our school's challenges and, heretofore, limited but encouraging successes. What follows then is a retelling of how the Gerrard Berman Day School, located in Oakland, New Jersey, embarked on what has been a fun, challenging, at-times frustrating, but always rewarding process to develop our Strategic Plan.

Our experience is neither completely indicative of, nor contrary to, an ideal process. Like every school, each strategic plan and the process by which it is developed is different. It reflects the unique character, mission, vision, challenges, needs and wishes of the individual school. It will have its own driving forces, develop its own momentum, and its success and implementation will be determined by the collective response from its own day school community.

Various factors contributed to our decision to engage in a strategic planning process. There was not one event or startling metric that determined it but rather a combination of factors. The need to develop long-term financial stability through an enhanced development process; the need to aggressively grown enrollment; the need to develop major gifts and institutional giving programs; the desire to formally manifest the ideals and goals of our newly developed mission statement; all of these factors contributed to the decision. Furthermore, our consultation with ISM for overall school improvement, as well as our decision to apply for Middle States accreditation – which required the submission of a strategic plan as part of the



Dr. Susan Kardos (Director, Initiative for Day School Excellence, Boston) charts the outcomes during the SSDSA strategic planning retreat.

application – solidified the resolve and the need for formally charting our plan for the future. Many practical issues were facing us, including questions pertaining to our physical plant, our development process, our financial goals, etc. To develop a set of long term strategic solutions to these questions, we knew that we had to hold a mirror up to the school and really question everything. As we investigated what would be involved in the process, we came to understand that in order to develop a plan of where we wanted to go, we'd have to critically and honestly examine who we are, where we are strong, and where we are less so. Therefore, the board of trustees, in concert with the Head of School, made the decision to formally begin this important process.

In the process of developing an overall timeline for our accreditation application, we scheduled to begin formal work on the strategic planning component in late spring. Therefore, approximately six months ago, we sat down to begin. Now when I say "begin", I mean we – the strategic planning committee appointed by the board – sat down with a rough model of what a strategic plan was suppose to look like and a table full of well-intentioned people. These brave and pioneering volunteers were a cross section of our school community, comprised of parents, teachers, administration, and members of the Board. We decided to open up membership on the committee to any and all from our school community who wanted to be heard, were willing to work hard on the project and commit to the ongoing process. We were pleasantly surprised that at those first few meetings we had many members participate. We were encouraged that those attending did represent different constituents within the school community. Over time, the total number of regular attendees diminished slightly but the "core" was constantly there and it lent long-lasting momentum to the process as it unfolded.

I will never forget that first meeting. It seemed that the discussions – at times emotional – about what we wanted, who we were, and where we wanted to go were all intertwined. We were fortunate in that also as part of our accreditation process, we had re-worked our mission statement, so the ideas were fresh in everyone's mind and assisted with the development of the strategic plan. However, as you can imagine, there were



Harlene Winnick Appelman (Executive Director, Covenant Foundation), Rabbi Mitch Cohen (Executive Director, National Ramah) and Rabbi Alan Silverstein (Congregation Agudath Israel, Caldwell, NJ) consider the challenges for the Schechter Association

many divergent perspectives, many different ideas about priorities and many strong opinions on how to get “there”, wherever “there” would be.

We pushed on. We continued to meet and things started to get more focused. At the first meeting we brainstormed using a series of about 200 (I’m not kidding) sticky notes, all with divergent ideas. By the fourth meeting we had narrowed those ideas into four main thematic groups, representing agreed upon macro goals for the school. Those goals were:

- Assessing our Physical Plant,
- Creating a Strategic Financial Plan
- Ensuring that we would enhance and continue to provide the finest Judaic and secular education possible
- Ensuring that we would continue to foster Jewish identity both in our students and their families.

With our goals firmly established, we set upon the task of developing action items to enable us to realizing the goals. Ours is a three year plan and we needed to develop measurable criteria to get us from year 1 to year 2 to year 3. The practical question that immediately emerged was how exactly would we measure results? How do you measure Jewish Identity? Certainly, educational milestones are easier to measure via test scores, right? Of course, we could all agree on which was more important, improving the athletic facilities or renovating the early childhood wing, right? Wrong. This is where the truly challenging and, at times, arduous work came into being.

It took us the rest of the summer to develop what we think are reasonable measurement criteria and consistently try to balance them against prevailing strategic planning wisdom. Furthermore, we wanted to always check our collective self against our mission statement and the reality of our aspirations. We soon discovered that it is very easy to “wish”


for things and put them into the strategic plan. However, the “wishes” must make sense in the context of the overall plan, the overall vision of the school and the viability of translating those wishes into achievable goals.

Finally, after the ninth meeting or so, the plan in its first draft was ready to present to the Board of Trustees. We were fortunate because there had been much communication and collaboration through the planning process already, and thankfully our Board ratified the goals of the plan on the first vote. However, this was only the beginning. Now we had to work the plan, i.e., make it dynamic and organic via specific action items and more than just a collection of ideas on paper with measurements next to them.


We decided to try and achieve two goals simultaneously. At the time the plan was being developed, we were also in the process of planning for our annual Board retreat for training and education of our Board members. Since we recognized

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 Chair: Rosalind Judd

Department of Education
 Dr. Robert Abramson, Director
 Dr. Elaine R.S. Cohen, Associate Director, Editor
 Serene Victor, Consultant for Synagogue Education
 Wendy Light, Consultant, Framework for Excellence Initiative
 Dorothy Sachs, Coordinator



Solomon Schechter Day School Association
 Andy Cohen, President



United Synagogue of Conservative
Judaism
 Dr. Raymond B. Goldstein, President
 Rabbi Jerome M. Epstein, Executive Vice-President

155 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010
 (212) 533-7800 x 2500
 education@uscj.org
 Website: <http://www.uscj.org> and www.ssdsa.org

The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism promotes the role of the synagogue in Jewish life in order to motivate Conservative Jews to perform *mitzvot* encompassing ethical behavior, spirituality, Judaic learning, and ritual observance. The Solomon Schechter Day Schools are affiliated with the United Synagogue and share with it these goals. Combining an awareness of communal responsibility with a strong sense of commitment, the United Synagogue and its affiliated Solomon Schechter Day Schools are a dynamic force within the Conservative Movement.

that the successful implementation of the strategic plan was going to be achieved through the actual work done – research, data collection, solicitation, training, investigation, etc—via the committees associated with the implementation of the plan, we decided to center our Board retreat around the plan itself. Our goal for the retreat would be to make sure that by the end of the day, each and every Board member knew exactly where he or she individually “fit” into the plan, understanding their individual responsibility for implementing a specific portion of the it. Some would participate on one of the ad-hoc committees established specifically for plan implementation (for example, we created a task force that we call JIDC, Jewish Identification Data Collection Committee) while others would take part in a standing Board Committee (i.e., Development or Committee on Trustees). Our intent was to make sure that each Trustee was firmly associated with committee goals in order to make sure that everyone “bought in.” Luckily, while our retreat was long and somewhat intense, the end result was that each member looked at the Plan in a new way – in a practical, manageable and specific format with the intent of making implementation as “doable” as possible. Everyone knew where they fit in and how they could make a difference to the long term success of the plan. It was a great day.

In planning for our retreat, we decided to use an outside facilitator to help us take an objective approach to developing our plan. After requesting several names of consultants from PEJE for this purpose, we chose Judith Michael. Judith has worked with many organizations (both Jewish and non-Jewish) in organizational development. She was very helpful in planning the retreat and facilitating the day, clearly understanding our goals.

At this juncture, each Board member now serves on at least one committee related to the plan. Our committee chair people understand the scope of their work, and they left the retreat with working documents to help them address the components of the plan pertaining to their group. We have timelines in place and dates for expected work to be completed. Committee presentations are going to be made at the next Board meeting, scheduled for the second week of November. I expect great and realistic results and am more excited about the fact that everyone is enthusiastic about the plan. The “buy in” strategy, I believe, has worked.

This all sounds great, but we are keenly aware that success of the plan going forward is going to be firmly based on the work done in the committees. Solicitation to the whole school community to get involved in the committee work has been done, asking people to serve in working groups that they would feel most interested in. We are always mindful though that, while the committees do have representatives of the school’s professional staffs on them, most committee members are volunteers. Parents, Board members, and other volunteers all have the craziness of their own lives to contend with in addition to the work they are lovingly doing for the school.

While the strategic planning process has given us a glimpse of where we can go in the future, I believe that the major challenge is going to be to maintain the momentum, excitement and relevance of the process itself as we move forward. I am confident that when the larger school community sees the measured progress that we will hopefully achieve, this will further drive the momentum of the implantation of the plan. However, I also know that we have to balance those expectations with the reality of working with volunteers and with the reality of the importance of the plan itself. It seems like we are doing a lot of balancing. That is what it has

taken us to get to this point – balancing ideas, balancing priorities, balancing resources, and it will have to continue as we implement the strategic plan going forward. That is one of the greatest lessons learned by me from this process – how to balance all of the divergent forces, perspectives, agendas, input and priorities that are driving the whole project.

In summary, here are some additional lessons learned (in no particular order) from our experience which I hope can help other schools:

- Keep the plan as measurable as possible without being too specific – you may end up “boxing yourself in” to goals that are too narrow.
- Get input from experienced strategic planning professionals where you can – ISM, consultants (in addition to Judith, we have a terrific accreditation consultant



The school choir at the Levine Academy in Dallas in a recent performance..

Schechter Sings – Israel @ 60!

Join with other Schechter schools from across North America in a joint musical celebration of Israel’s 60th birthday!

- Send your choir leader’s e-mail address to education@uscj.org
- Save the date — Rosh Hodesh Iyyar, May 6, 2008 for a national performance of Schechter school choirs
- Generate enthusiasm for a joint musical program among your teachers, students, parents and board members
- Have your school’s choir prepare a Hebrew song for a DVD “Schechter Sings”
- Send ideas for collaborative music programs to the new listserv, ssds-music@uscj.org
- Keep on the alert for electronic updates of Schechter Sings – Israel@60!

named Mike Brasslov who did a great job in helping to move the process forward)

- Make sure that you have strong committee chairpersons – preferably experienced board members or members whom you would like to develop for leadership positions. Either way, it is critical that you choose people who can properly oversee the work of the committee in an organized fashion.
- Get “buy in” from many constituencies in the school, but don’t let the “buying in” process hold you back from moving forward with the plan.
- Accept that the plan will change and that it’s a living, dynamic instrument – setbacks and “reality checks” are going to happen and should happen. That’s how you’ll learn along the way.
- Encourage people to do specific jobs within their committees that represent their interests. The best way is to get people working on things that they feel comfortable with and passionate about.
- Communicate the progress of the plan to the school community at large. I am now writing a monthly column in our school newsletter updating the community on our progress. It’s a good way to get people to ask questions and understand the importance of the process.
- Recognize that you are going to make mistakes. Its part of the process

Have fun – your doing a great thing by ensuring the long term success of you school!

Please contact me at apaley@cypresshealthcare.net if you have any questions or would like any additional information about our experience. ☐

*Alex Paley, President, Board of Trustees
Gerrard Berman Day School / Solomon Schechter of North Jersey*

May the Study of Torah Be As Sweet As Honey: A Critical Review of *MaToK*, the New Bible Curriculum for Solomon Schechter Day Schools

More than fifty years have passed since the first Conservative day school opened its doors at Congregation Beth El in Rockaway Park, New York, in 1951. With the proliferation of Schechter schools in recent years, growing numbers of students appear to be joyously occupied in daily Jewish study. To acknowledge this achievement, however, is not to demonstrate the schools’ success in initiating those students into the thought process of the Conservative movement. One may make a reasonable, though not thoroughly documented, assumption that day school students are likely to develop a stronger sense of Jewish identity than others. But that assumption itself raises the question of the type of Jewish identity being fostered, a question whose significance is heightened by the realization that precious little curriculum material used in Schechter school in these fifty years has been developed under Conser-



The joint Middle School and High School Choir of the SSDS of Long Island makes a bright impression when they perform together

School applications for becoming a residency school for a SREL Fellow are due on December 17, 2007.

Don't miss the opportunity for *MaToK* training that Dr. Debby Miller is offering immediately following the Professionals Conference in Las Vegas - January 15-17, 2008.

vative auspices. The new *MaToK* Bible Curriculum, now being published after seven years of curriculum development under Conservative auspices, was designed in part to address this compelling omission.

What *MaToK* gives us is a carefully articulated curriculum for teaching Humash in Conservative day schools in grades three through six. Consisting of twenty-five volumes for the teacher with accompanying student workbooks/textbooks, *MaToK* results from a seven-year development process originally funded by the Jim Joseph Foundation. Steeped in Conservative thought, the curriculum adopts and instructs the teacher in sophisticated but child-friendly instructional approaches.

An argument can easily be made that we are decades late. During the 1996–97 school years, the Solomon Schechter Day School Principals Council asked its members to prioritize among a number of potential projects. At the top of the priorities were the development of a Conservative Bible curriculum, financial concerns (“ever-increasing tuition” and “non-competitive teaching salaries”) and a perceived need for enhanced communication among school heads. Although it had never previously undertaken a project of dramatic scope, the Council decided to pick up the challenge.

After developing a set of guiding principles, Rabbi Bob

Abramson, head of the Department of Education of the United Synagogue, and Dr. Steve Brown, then associate dean of the Davidson School of Jewish Education and director of the Melton Research Center for Jewish Education, submitted a grant proposal to the Jim Joseph Foundation. In the spring of 1998, when the grant proposal was accepted, Debby Miller had already submitted her resignation from her position as principal of a Schechter school in New Jersey to accept the appointment as project director, and Marcia Lapidus Kaunfer, then Jewish studies coordinator at another Schechter school, was chosen as head writer. Steve Brown chose the name *Mivtza Tanakhi Kon-servativi*, yielding the felicitous acronym MaToK. The Jim Joseph grant was to run for five years, and provide a total of \$650,000.

In his book *Textual Knowledge: Teaching the Bible in Theory and Practice*, Barry Holtz quotes Eugene Goodheart's notion that a classic, rather than portraying to us that which is familiar, challenges us with its "strangeness." This is a fascinating way of thinking about the existential confrontation with tradition that lies at the core of the Conservative mentality. The authors of the Bible texts described by Shine Gold avoided "strangeness" at all costs. Recognizing how easy it is to allow our thought patterns to be dictated by contemporary modes of thought, we need to apply a self-conscious screen to our own educational efforts. While instruction needs to be informed by contemporary thinking and Western values, we need to do our best to allow the biblical text to introduce students to the ways in which our tradition challenges contemporary values.

With the above as background, I suggest five criteria by which we can judge the success of materials intended for use in a Bible curriculum for Conservative day schools:

1. The extent to which it appears to be free of a mimetic attitude to contemporary culture. Sometimes contemporary culture and tradition inform one another; at other times, one challenges the other. Since, at least from the time of Schechter, we have recognized that the line between "inform" and "challenge" moves over time, a Conservative approach to Bible instruction would also need to be judged by:
2. The extent to which we make clear to students that we reinterpret the Bible—carefully, in accordance with certain principles, and with respect for the insights of our ancestors—but we do reinterpret it. Making this acknowledgement with children is not an easy task, and therefore, another criterion would be:
3. The extent to which the curriculum suits the developmental levels of students without stooping to simplistic or dishonest answers to difficult questions. Contemporary research suggests that children may be more capable of complex thinking and spiritual awareness than previously has been assumed.¹² Curriculum materials need to provide sensitive teachers with tools to elicit students' questions and thoughts, while probing and responding to their readiness for more complex answers.
4. The extent to which the curriculum promotes a non-simplistic theology in its approach to such issues as miracles, revelation and reward and punishment. Without turning into a course in contemporary biblical scholarship and interpretation, the curriculum would be informed by the fruits of this work, including feminist readings of the text.

5. The extent to which the materials promote good pedagogy. This category encompasses a broad collection of issues: clarity and feasibility of teaching objectives, level of difficulty, activities that promote inquiry or other active learning strategies, provision for students' varied learning styles, and the richness of teacher materials, including background information and training materials for teachers.

6. The extent to which the curriculum enables students to learn Bible in Hebrew, using Hebrew as the primary language of the classroom. Even in day schools with strong Hebrew language commitments, elementary-age students find biblical language highly challenging, yet the day school is our opportunity to teach Bible authentically, and that means in Hebrew.

Weaknesses

Before summarizing the strengths of the curriculum, I note several general areas in which MaToK can be faulted. I categorize these under the headings of personalization, conceptual difficulty and Hebrew.

Personalization: With all of MaToK's strengths, it is somewhat weak in what Barry Holtz calls the "personalization orientation."

To be sure, there are examples of personalization throughout the curriculum, but they are surprisingly scattered and usually not central to the lesson.

Conceptual difficulty: It is hard to fault the authors, rather than the Author(s), on this score. Nonetheless, it is the job of the curriculum to open the text to young children. Usually MaToK succeeds, but not always.

Hebrew difficulty: Far from resolving the tension between teaching Hebrew and teaching ideas, MaToK only seems to sharpen it. In her dissertation, Miller questions whether it is possible to accomplish both the language and "existential" goals of the school without sacrificing one to the other.¹⁹

Few in Conservative day schools advocate Bible instruction in English. On the other hand, teaching Bible richly and teaching it in Hebrew stretch the abilities of most teachers—and their students—beyond the breaking point. When something needs to give, it probably needs to be Hebrew.

Strengths

Active learning and pedagogy: MaToK has moved significantly, and effectively, away from the traditional model of pouring information into little minds, in favor of enabling children to ferret out information to create meaning. In doing so, it relies heavily on methods of literary criticism as tools for comprehension, as illustrated above. It is creative in its instructional strategies, providing vivid activities that stimulate and hold interest.

Moving beneath the surface of texts: Without contradicting the literal understanding that might more easily fit students' developmental level, the curriculum typically leads students to a deeper level of understanding that, one can hope, will remain with them when they can see beyond a concrete understanding of the text. The encouragement for students either to develop their own understandings or, as in the burning bush unit, to choose among preferred interpretations, naturally initiates students into an ongoing process of interpretation without entering into theoretical discussion (criteria 2 and 3).

Hebrew: Notwithstanding the above-noted unresolved ten-

sion between teaching in Hebrew and teaching ideas, it would be an omission not also to cite as a strength MaToK's commitment to the vision of Bible instruction as idea-rich and taught in Hebrew. More often than not MaToK succeeds in its use of Hebrew, even if, as suggested above, it has not put the problem to rest (criterion 6).

Cultural or Counter-Cultural: A significant way in which MaToK is healthily out-of-step with contemporary trends is the seriousness with which it takes God-talk. I have seen little day school curriculum that takes upon itself the responsibility to engage students in discussion of this kind in a sustained fashion (indeed, each student is to maintain and update "My Journal About God"). One also notes in the curriculum an emphasis on collective responsibility, as opposed to individual freedom. The themes of God-talk and collective responsibility, which reappear throughout MaToK, suggest a counter-cultural quality.

Twenty-five to fifty years from now, Schechter schools will want a new Bible curriculum that will respond to new ideational issues, new pedagogical concepts and new needs induced by the continued evolution of the day school movement. Such a curriculum will see beyond MaToK, but in order to do so it will need to stand on MaToK's shoulders. The Solomon Schechter Day School Principals Council, the United Synagogue's Department of Education and the Melton Center of the Jewish Theological Seminary have performed a service to the Conservative movement every bit as significant as the more publicly noted and legitimately lauded Etz Chaim, and has created a model for day school curriculum development that will be imitated by others. □

Laurence Scheindlin, Head of School, Sinai Akiba Academy, Los Angeles, CA

To read the full article, please go to www.ssdsa.org/ resources and click on MaToK. Read the article by Larry Scheindlin, Head of School, Sinai Akiba, entitled "May the Study of Torah Be As Sweet As Honey: A Critical Review of MaToK," reprinted with the permission of the Rabbinical Assembly, from *Conservative Judaism*. 59(2) pp. 26-49.

As the Schechter Association works to utilize technology in support of its programs and services and to create an online knowledge bank, we will suspend publication of *Shibboleth Schechter* after the current issue. We will further develop and expand our website www.ssdsa.org, keeping it current with up-to-date articles, monographs, best practices, school policies, and other relevant resources.