



## **LaHaV: Educational Theory for a Judaic Studies Curriculum**

This paper will describe the research and theory behind the design of the LaHaV Judaic studies curriculum in an effort to articulate the vision behind our curriculum design initiative. As Schwab (1973) has argued, curricular change requires consideration of four separate “commonplaces” - voices and perspectives that must be taken into account and equally balanced in order to ensure successful implementation of a new curriculum. As a result, our curriculum has considered each of these stakeholders while also drawing upon the foundational work of Bruner (1961), Dewey (1902), and others.

To begin, we argue that we must place our students at the center of this initiative. Our goal is to successfully inspire our students to lead rich, meaningful, and informed Jewish lives, and Schwab has argued forcefully for the careful consideration of learner “attitudes, competences, and propensities” (Schwab, 502) within curriculum design. While it is true that this specific goal is the product of what Schwab would describe as the “milieu” of our project - namely, the communal, cultural, and institutional priorities that have shaped our curriculum and its desired learner outcomes - we still must ask ourselves, in pursuit of this goal, what the students in our school *want* to learn. Indeed, as John Dewey has famously argued, our curricular content should





be determined by the child's needs and interests, "developed within the range and scope of the child's life" (Dewey, 38). In other words, learning must have real world application and relevance rooted within our students' experience. And so, we must make our most essential proposal entirely clear: the content that we teach must be made immediately relevant to the religious, social, and communal identities of our students. Indeed, members of our parent body who have pointed out that school curricula should meet the needs and desires of our students are entirely correct; without carefully incorporating this fact into the learning of Talmud and Tanakh, we risk the richness of our tradition falling upon deaf ears within the classroom, our heritage left barren, arcane and bereft of meaning, devoid of what Dewey refers to as "origin and bearing in a growing experience" for our students (Dewey, 37).

What is it then, that our students are looking for? What does "real world learning" look like in Judaic studies? In our surveys of learner interests and goals, we've heard thoughtful, curious, and honest feedback about what they are yearning to know about our tradition: Is God moral? Can Jewish law - a product of ancient society - change, and if so, how? Does God listen to and care about our prayers? Does the State of Israel today represent the historic redemption of the Jewish people? What gives the Rabbis authority to make law? Does Judaism treat women differently than men? What is Judaism's relationship to the world around us? Is Shabbat still meaningful within a technologically advanced society? These are the essential questions that our students are





asking, and we must ensure that our curricula provide them with answers - their Jewish identity depends on it. Furthermore, we must point out that these issues are reflections of the specific milieu of our school community and parent body: as a Modern Orthodox, Religious Zionist institution, these questions are at the core of who we are both culturally and communally: committed to openness, critical thinking, the values of gender equality and Zionism, as well as the development of a meaningful relationship with God. And so, what this means, first and foremost, is that we must be willing to question the centuries-old approach of traditional Jewish learning, which for generations has been focused on studying specific tractates and chapters, guided only by the flow of the text from page to page. While some experts with whom we've consulted on this project have recommended sticking closely to the traditional methodology, we must respectfully keep in mind Schwab's admonition that ultimately, "scholars, as such, are incompetent to translate scholarly material into curriculum" (Schwab, 501). As Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein (2007) has argued in his discussion of curricular priorities, "minimal educational responsibility dictates that we not amuse ourselves with illusions or nostalgia. Are we to assuming the danger of sacrificing our students' future on the altar of our dreams?" (Lichtenstein, 19). Indeed, if our emphasis upon traditional *gemara* study is guided by blind nostalgia for





“how it’s been done<sup>1</sup>,” by a rigid elitism, or by deliberate ignorance of the social, developmental, religious, and intellectual realities of our students, then we risk committing a grave injustice to the students and communities who have entrusted us with a sacred educational responsibility.

Our willingness to rethink the traditional approach is rooted not only in our focus on student needs, but also on the basics of curricular design. Make no mistake: learning *masekhet Brakhot* freshman year, *Kiddushin* sophomore year, followed by *Bava Kamma* and *Bava Metzia* in junior and senior year is not a curriculum; it’s a booklist. As Bruner (1961) has pointed out, effective curriculum design requires far more structure, planning, and integration than is currently being achieved through the traditional approach. Indeed, Bruner’s argument for a “spiraled” curriculum, for the necessity of “learning initially not a skill, but a general idea, which can then be used as the basis for recognizing subsequent problems” (Bruner, 17) serves as the basis for our curricular recommendation. Our instruction is based upon a deliberate introduction to the fundamental principles, values, and questions that inform the enterprise of rabbinic activity and

Jewish tradition: Is Jewish law human or Divine? Rigid or flexible? What is the source and

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted in this context that the sense of “this is how it’s been done” is likely rooted in an inaccurate reading of historical reality. Indeed, as Ephraim Kanarfogel (1992) has argued, even at the heights of German medieval scholarship, regular, systematic, and intensive study of Talmud was likely restricted to only a tiny segment of society, with the Tosafist yeshivot populated by no more than 60-100 students at a time, and the masses of Jewish students instead supported by a privatized education system that provided for their tutoring as a limited introduction to Torah study. Similarly, as Shaul Stampfer (1988) and others have argued, even the famed yeshivot of Eastern Europe served only small segments of the population - with the majority of Jews in Eastern Europe unable to independently study a page of Talmud - leaving us to conclude that the focus on traditional gemara learning on a mass scale as the only Talmud option within our day school system may in fact be rooted in a distorted view of the reality of education and curriculum in medieval and early modern Jewish society.





scope of Rabbinic authority? Is halakha a democracy? How do decision actually get made in Halakha? Guided by these questions, our students will be able to uncover the sources and nature of rabbinic authority and the mechanisms by which halakhic decisions are made, with coursework including sevara, minhag, majority rule, judicial independence, diversity, unity, leniency, and the role of precedent in Jewish law. By introducing students to these fundamental issues in 9th and 10th grades, we prepare them to subsequently transfer this body of knowledge during 11th and 12th grades into relevant real world issues facing our communities today, from status of women in communal prayer, to the ordination of female Orthodox rabbis, the *aguna* crisis, the establishment of *Yom Ha'azmaut*, negotiating land for peace and observance of *shemita* in Israel today, to the use of the electricity on Shabbat. We can, as Bruner has suggested, provide our students with a much needed “model for understanding other things that one may encounter” (Bruner, 25) within their lived Jewish and communal experiences.

While we obviously recognize the sanctity and value of traditional, tractate-based learning - and see motivation for such learning as a desired outcome of our curriculum - based on the foundations of curriculum design theory and the realities of our student body, we feel that such an approach would not sufficiently address the needs of our school and community. Furthermore, we have received significant support and interest from other experts in the field, including Rabbi Jeremy Weider at Yeshiva University and Professor Aharon Amit at Bar Ilan University in Israel.





Taken together, we're confident that this change is not only necessary, but that it has been transformative for our students and community, as well as others who have adopted LaHaV.

We've also heard voices within our staff and parent body who have called for a curriculum that is based on texts and facts, and our approach fully embraces their important suggestion. Indeed, the issues that we have outlined above are issues that the Talmud and commentaries have addressed and debated for millennia. Through our research, we've identified and selected hundreds of sources from the Talmud, commentaries, and legal codes that weave together advanced textual skills and literacy with enduring understandings to provide, in Dewey's formulation, the "map" which will serve as an effective "guide to future experiences" and journeys that our students will take in their respective Jewish lives.

Regarding our teaching staff, the introduction of this curriculum has provided critical support, in two separate yet essential ways. First, by introducing a spiraled curriculum with clearly stated objectives, well-structured content, and immediately relevant enduring understandings, our teachers are no longer be left to fend for themselves in the classroom. We are often expected to research and plan material on our own while also honing the structure, execution, and assessment of each course – before even stepping into the classroom to communicate with our students. The result is often an exhausting balancing act for our entire staff that can crush novice teachers who





are first starting out and discourage even our most experienced teachers. Instead, through this proposed curriculum, presented together with teacher's guides for each source and overviews for each unit, our teachers - along with other teams who have adopted LaHaV as well - have been able to emerge from the debilitating expectations of reinventing the wheel around each Talmudic tractate, and instead focus on collaborating towards pedagogical excellence, inspirational communication, and meaningful relationships with students both inside and out of the classroom.

Finally, the spiraled curriculum provides us with opportunities not just for vertical integration among the Judaic studies curriculum courses - a significant achievement in its own right - but can also facilitate the horizontal integration of our materials across disciplines. As Zelden (1998), Fogarty (2009) and others have argued, integration across grade levels and disciplines to support, reinforce, and transfer student learning. is a basic pedagogic necessity. Indeed, we found broad consensus among our staff that the connection and coordination between Judaic and "General" studies staff can be improved, and this proposed curricular vision has allowed us to identify areas for integration: How does halakhic jurisprudence differ from the norms of the American legal system that is studied in our AP government courses? How was political Zionism shaped by traditional views of messianism and authority? What social, economic, political and military factors that our students learn about in their World History courses may have impacted the course and development of rabbinic authority, history, and thought? These suggestions are only initial attempts to scope out the opportunities for sequenced, shared, or webbed integration





within our proposed curriculum, and offer a path forward for our staff to collaborate upon as we move toward integration and implementation.

This project is the result of years of research, reflection, collaboration, and discussion among our staff and school to identify a way forward to transform our curricular approach in Judaic studies to better meet the needs and incorporate the voices of our various educational stakeholders.

We've carefully considered the literature and best practices behind curricular design, and have heard from students, parents, teachers, and our partner schools along the way - and we are excited for the continued growth and impact of our project.

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