

Reflections / Réflexions

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**Conservative Jewish Education in Toronto:
An Interview with Dr. Aaron M. Nussbaum,
Founding Director of United Synagogue Day School**

Abstract

The significance of the following interview with Dr. Aaron M. Nussbaum, founding director of education of the United Synagogue Day School of Toronto, is twofold. First, the discussion reveals Dr. Nussbaum's innovations in day school structure and character, emphasis on the self-esteem of the students, on the integration of Jewish and general studies curricular strands, and on approaches to a well-rounded Jewish education. These elements signal developments in Jewish demographics, attitudes, and pedagogy in Toronto in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Second, Dr. Nussbaum's thinking offers a valuable window into the world of Conservative Judaism at the beginning of its suburban heyday in Toronto. By extension, his contemplations illuminate the roles of Toronto's Beth Tzedec Congregation and its spiritual leader in the development of local Jewish education. Dr. Nussbaum's analytical recall also sheds light on angst about ethnic identity, experienced by upwardly mobile, Toronto Jews at the time. More scholarship on the formats and emphases of the Jewish education of this era is needed in general, and Dr. Nussbaum's reflections can serve to catalyze further investigation.

Résumé

L'importance de cet entretien avec le Dr Aaron M. Nussbaum, directeur et fondateur de l'éducation de la United Synagogue Day School de Toronto, est double. Premièrement, la discussion révèle les innovations du Dr Nussbaum dans la structure et le caractère de ces écoles, où l'accent mis sur l'estime de soi des élèves, l'intégration des programmes en études juives et générales et sur des approches pour une éducation juive équilibrée. Ces éléments témoignent de l'évolution de la démographie, des attitudes et de la pédagogie juives à Toronto à la fin des années 1950 et au début des années 1960. Deuxièmement, les réflexions du Dr. Nussbaum offrent une fenêtre précieuse sur le monde juif conservateur, au début de son apogée dans la banlieue torontoise. De ce fait, elles éclairent le rôle de la congrégation Beth Tzedec de Toronto et de son chef spirituel dans le développement de l'éducation juive locale. Les rappels analytiques du Dr. Nussbaum mettent également en lumière l'anxiété concernant l'identité ethnique vécue par la population juive de Toronto de l'époque, en pleine ascension sociale. De manière générale, davantage de recherches sur les modalités et les priorités de l'éducation juive à ce moment historique s'avèrent nécessaires, et les réflexions du Dr. Nussbaum peuvent ainsi servir à catalyser des recherches plus approfondies.

Between 1946 and 1965 most Toronto Jews moved north from their downtown enclaves to a lengthy strip along Bathurst Street, running roughly from St. Clair to Sheppard Avenues. This shift was part of a city wide—indeed continent-wide—trend of suburbanization. It was spurred by a rise in demand for housing, stemming from the war years, the return of soldiers, economic expansion, and the beginning

of what came to be called the baby boom. It was fuelled by a rapidly increasing supply of accessible single-family housing, backed by newly accessible, long-term mortgage financing. The Jewish population of the areas surrounding Beth Tzedec Congregation swelled from six thousand in 1951 to eleven thousand by 1961, the year Dr. Aaron M. Nussbaum arrived in Toronto.

Dr. Nussbaum's destination, Beth Tzedec, was the product of the 1955 amalgamation of two major downtown synagogues: Goel Tzedec, a wealthy synagogue that had joined the Conservative movement in 1925 and Bet HaMidrash HaGadol Chevra Tehillim (known colloquially as "the McCaul Street shul"), which was Orthodox and whose members wanted change. The amalgamation was a response to the quick pace of Jewish migration northward up the Bathurst corridor and the realization that combining synagogues would yield the financial clout to build one of Toronto's large "synagogue-centres" replete with theatre-style sanctuaries, commercial-quality kitchens, banquet halls, gyms, and school wings to attract the "new" suburban Jew. In 1946, Goel Tzedec had already purchased land in the Bathurst and Eglinton area, two blocks south of Holy Blossom Temple's magnificent building—testimony to the leadership's ability to quickly read demographic trends, the leaders' fundraising capability, and their desire to construct an edifice that reflected their upward mobility, right on the western boundary of Forest Hill. With this end in mind, and to minimize conflict, the leadership of the two synagogues agreed that neither of their spiritual leaders would take over the merged congregation. Instead, a new rabbi would be chosen.

The new edifice was to be designed by architect, Peter Dickinson, a prominent proponent of mid-century modern style. The message was clear. The Jews of Toronto, or at least some of the more affluent members of the community, prevented until 1950 by now illegal racial covenants from moving into posh, non-Jewish neighborhoods, had arrived in earnest.

Thirty-four-year-old Rabbi Dr. Stuart E. Rosenberg's style and accomplishments dovetailed with those of the congregation. He was determined to make his mark and place the congregation on the map of North American Jewry. Part of the allure of Conservative synagogues for suburbanites lay in the fact that, unlike in downtown Orthodox synagogues, men and women could sit together. The suburban Toronto Jew believed in the contemporary adage, "The family that prays together stays together." Sophisticated age-based programming was introduced on Shabbat mornings so that people of varying age groups could pray and learn in age-appropriate settings. The sophisticated suburban Jew wanted a Sabbath service that went beyond prayer. Shabbat at Beth Tzedec became an experience. Rosenberg honed his oratorical skills to ensure that his sermons were highly polished centrepieces of Sabbath mornings and that his delivery commanded attention. These also attracted many non-Jews who showed up weekly in time to listen. Rosenberg soon began writing

a weekly newspaper column and invited prominent Jewish intellectuals from the Jewish Theological Seminary, in New York, as well as Israeli politicians to address the congregation on Shabbat mornings and during weekday programs.

Rosenberg's reach extended beyond the synagogue's sanctuary. He was vitally interested in promoting Jewish education, an idea that required recognition and attention. Although the first Toronto Jewish day school classes had recently begun in 1940 at the Toronto Hebrew Free School, later known as Associated Hebrew Schools, the overwhelming majority of Beth Tzedec's children attended public school. It was clear that there was rather limited time for them to receive a Jewish education. Ever the keen observer, Rosenberg noted that suburbanization strengthened this trend because of suburban Jewish parents' desire to ensure that their children "fit in" with their non-Jewish neighbours. The default response to this situation in North America for Conservative Jews was the "congregational school." Such synagogue-run schools typically met on Sunday mornings and one or two weekday evenings per week, after school. Parents and students alike resented this educational model because the schedule encroached on the increasingly sacred "family weekend" and made it challenging to enjoy weekday, extracurricular activities. Yet parental resentment was tempered by the realization that the congregational school model was the best model available to balance their priorities. At the time, Rosenberg suggested the adoption of an alternative model of Jewish schooling, known in the field as a foundation school. Dr. Nussbaum discussed the concept and its origins during the first of a two-part interview by the authors, at his Toronto home, on June 5 and October 15, 2023.

From Foundation School to United Synagogue Day School

In the mid 1950s, Toronto's Conservative Jewish community became home to the Foundation Day School, housed in Beth Tzedec. It was based on a model proposed by Hyman Chanover, a respected Jewish educator, who envisioned a day school setting for students' first five years of education, from nursery through grade 2. This schooling would build a firm foundation for children's knowledge and understanding of Hebrew and Yiddishkeit. It was to serve as a springboard to further, intensive Jewish study. The plan at the synagogue was that in grade 3, when the eight-year-olds were to start attending public schools, they would also join the Beth Tzedec Congregational School in a specially designed "Foundation Track" that would build on their enriched, early years education in Hebrew language and Jewish learning.

At Beth Tzedec there was already a functioning nursery as a potential feeder school, and there were more children among the families of the congregation. When the foundation school launched its kindergarten at Beth Tzedec in 1956, it attracted a highly committed attendance. Dr. Nussbaum, who arrived at the school in 1961, re-

calls being told that roughly one-third of Beth Tzedec parents opted for the foundation school concept when it was put into practice, apparently pleased with the prospects of all schooling all under one roof, and receptive to an excellent grounding for their children in Hebrew and Jewish life competencies involving *tefillah* (prayer), *mitzvot* (commandments), and *minhagim* (customs).¹ The families reinforced all of these through attendance at Beth Tzedec for Shabbat and holiday services and a range of age-appropriate programs.

While we still lack the exact enrolment numbers that would reveal how many students went on to grades 1 and 2 in the Foundation Day School, it appears that a considerable number of parents had second thoughts about their children remaining outside of public school after senior kindergarten. At that juncture the school noted a sizable drop in enrolment. By 1960, just under one hundred students remained. Beth Tzedec's congregational school attendance, comprised of children who attended public school by day, numbered approximately seven hundred.

Despite the disparity, to focus solely on the post-kindergarten decline in Foundation Day School enrolment would be to ignore the singular phenomenon that brought Dr. Nussbaum to Toronto and ultimately launched the largest Solomon Schechter Day School in North America. In 1960 a wonderful thing occurred. A grassroots group of parents sought a continuation of the full-time schooling in Jewish and general education for their children. They managed to secure a grade 3 extension year for the foundation school. Rosenberg quickly raised the necessary funds, and grade 3 was added. That year, with over one hundred students in the Foundation Day School, it was clear that a full-time principal was needed.

In 1961, Dr. Aaron Nussbaum arrived from New York to take charge of the school, soon to be renamed the United Synagogue Day School. By then, there were 115 pupils from kindergarten to grade 4. With the support of interested families, as well as advocacy and fundraising conducted largely by Rosenberg, a Conservative Jewish day school was born. It was sponsored thereafter by all the Conservative synagogues of Toronto.

When Dr. Nussbaum was appointed principal that year, he added the school's Hebrew name, *Beit Hīnukh Kol Yomi*. Although *Beit Hīnukh*, accenting "education," was an unconventional name in North American circles, it had a presence and precedent in Israel's *Mishmar Ha-Emeq* school. About ten years later, Dr. Nussbaum refocused the name as *Beit Hīnukh Shalem*. He chose that formulation in part to reflect the comprehensive nature of an education that included arts, attention to civics, and physical education—in addition to academic studies—and in part to highlight the affiliation with United Synagogue, the educational arm of the Conservative Movement. The Hebrew letter *shin* emblazoned on the school's letterhead evokes the *shin* that appeared on the logo of United Synagogue of America (now known as United

Synagogue of Conservative Judaism). In general, *shin* in that context evokes the Hebrew word for the “almighty” aspect of divinity. We often see *shin* for the same reason on *mezuzot*. In the context of the logo of United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, the *shin* is stylized as the burning bush. *Shin* is also the first letter in the word *shalem* (full, complete) to gesture, as mentioned, toward the broad and balanced, well-rounded education implemented by the new school: *Beit Hinukh Shalem*. The school became known in English by its parallel, rather than direct, translation as United Synagogue Day School (USDS).²

The 1960s were heady days for the Conservative Movement in Canada, and the inception of the school attracted its share of attention, as did the Movement itself. In 1966, courted by Rosenberg, the Conservative rabbis of the Rabbinical Assembly (RA) convened their annual meeting in Toronto. The organization attracted federal attention when the RA awarded an honorary doctorate to Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson. The meeting also presented an occasion for the North American Conservative rabbis in attendance to visit USDS.

Dr. Nussbaum: Background, Educational Trajectory, Interview and Appointment

Aaron M. Nussbaum, born Shalom Aharon Meir, grew up in Belgium and received a traditional Jewish education. During the Holocaust, together with his family, Nussbaum managed to escape to New York. There he concentrated on Jewish studies and education at the Jewish Theological Seminary and City College. Among the erudite professionals at JTS in those days was the eminent professor, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. At JTS, Nussbaum went on to earn a doctorate in Jewish education with a focus on Jewish history, philosophy, and education.

As a member of *Ha-Shomer Ha-Dati*—an Orthodox Zionist social justice organization—he met individuals who would become influential in his life. They included his future bride and lifelong partner, Esther (Halberstam z.l.). Among the *haverim* (members) of *Ha-Shomer Ha-Dati*, Dr. Nussbaum became well acquainted with Rabbi Yitzhak Witty z.l., Dr. Shoshana Kurtz z.l., and Dr. Harold Malitzky z.l. These three became central figures of Canada’s Jewish education landscape, specifically leaders in Toronto’s Board of Jewish Education (BJE).

In 1948, Dr. Nussbaum had worked at Camp Moshava in Canada and was open, after some coaxing, to a return to Canada. He accounts the fact that his beloved Esther, also an accomplished, vivacious educator and role model, was willing to accompany him—to a land that some Americans feared as wilderness—as *hesed ne’urim* (youthful devotion).³

Before coming to Canada, Dr. Nussbaum worked as a teacher at a Hebrew school in Hempstead, Long Island, and commuted to Manhattan for his graduate studies several times a week. He describes, rather comically, having been sent to Toronto for a morning interview on a teaching day, with the firm understanding that he was to show up for work in Hempstead that same afternoon. Dr. Shimon Frost, the placement officer at the American Association for Jewish Education, was interested in recommending Dr. Nussbaum to become principal of USDS. Frost's plan ultimately came to fruition. The day of the interview, Dr. Nussbaum actually made it back to Long Island in time for teaching, even without the *metzi'a* (innovation) that we now call Nexus.

The interview for USDS took place at the office of the Jewish Welfare Fund on Beverley Street. Rabbi Rosenberg, also an alumnus of JTS, was interested in Dr. Nussbaum for school leadership because of their similar learning background that had bearing on their teaching gestalt. What really caught Rosenberg's attention, however, was Dr. Nussbaum's self-characterization during the ensuing dialogue. Nussbaum quipped, "I think like Professor Mordecai Kaplan, but I act like Professor Abraham Joshua Heschel."

Thinks Like Kaplan, Observes Like Heschel

Dr. Nussbaum recalls that his early days as principal of USDS demanded numerous conversations with parents about the day school model. He relates that "second and third generation [North American] Jewish parents *insisted*, practically, that their kids go to public school.... I had meetings galore with the parents, and their main concern was their kids, socially. They said, 'If they attend day school, they won't know how to mix with the other kids.' I said to them, 'You're right, but if you send kids to day school, by 4 p.m. they will be free to mingle with all the other kids on the block, no matter what.'" Parents were concerned that their children would grow up insular and not learn how to relate to members of the general populace.

For many years the school's enrolment filled to capacity. For years, parents wishing to sign their preschoolers up for the nursery stood in line at Beth Tzedec well before dawn, and later at the uptown Beth Tikvah Synagogue as well. Eventually, USDS grew from a single campus to three in the Greater Toronto Area, each lodged in a Conservative shul: Bathurst Campus, in Beth Tzedec (nursery school to grade 9 at first; nursery/junior kindergarten to grade 8 after grade 9 became part of high school in Ontario), Bayview Campus at Beth Tikvah Synagogue (junior kindergarten to grade 8), and Richmond Hill Campus, at first in the Richmond Hill Community Centre, and later in the Beit Rayim Synagogue (junior kindergarten to grade 8).

Early on, as part of his appointment, Dr. Nussbaum was asked to oversee United Synagogue Youth (USY) and Leadership Training Fellowship (LTF). As part of the large Eastern Canada Region of USY (ECRUSY), Dr. Nussbaum met some like-minded, vibrant Jewish educators who became leading academics in Canada: Dr. Seymour Epstein and Professor Gershon Hundert. Epstein developed and oversaw McGill University's Jewish Teacher Education Program in the 1970s at the ripe age of twenty-seven, and later became the director of UJA Federation's Board of Jewish Education, positions that bookended a chain of significant, formal and informal Jewish education positions worldwide. Early on, Gershon Hundert z.l., served as an assistant unit head at Camp Ramah, alongside the unit head, Judith Hauptman. Hauptman is now a leading academic and professor of Talmud at JTS. Hundert became an active scholar and professor of Eastern European Jewish history at McGill. Dr. Nussbaum maintained productive ties with the individuals he encountered through Conservative Jewish youth groups and at one point welcomed Epstein to oversee an experimental Conservative Jewish high school, alongside nursery to grade 9, at USDS's Beth Tzedec location. USDS sponsored the high school for two years until it united with CHAT (Community Hebrew Academy of Toronto) in 1975.

USDS: Distinguishing Features, Priorities and Educational Principles

We asked Dr. Nussbaum a set of interview questions about what features distinguished USDS from parallel day schools in the Solomon Schechter Day Schools network in North America. We also asked what distinguished USDS from other Toronto-area day schools. In responding, Dr. Nussbaum included important educational decisions, the nature of Toronto's Jewish community, aspects of Canadian Conservative Jewish demographics and expressions of Yiddishkeit as compared to those of contemporaneous parallels in the United States. He also contributed factors about physical plant, operating budget, and surroundings that had bearing on the school's educational priorities and principles.

Dr. Nussbaum outlined that USDS was the largest of the Solomon Schechter day schools in the network and pointed out a few factors that contributed to the steady growth of the student body which numbered approximately 1450 at its height. He explained a decision to house each campus together with a Conservative synagogue: a decision that was important atmospherically and instrumentally. Atmospherically, the locations expressed the importance of authenticity in terms of modelling day-to-day Jewish living and ritual life. The synagogues gave the schools access to their chapels and main sanctuaries so that communal *tefillot*, ceremonies, and celebrations could be held in a *beit kneset* (synagogue) environment. There, the students could see and handle the relevant *tashmischei mitzvah* and *tashmischei kedushah* (artistically crafted accoutrements for prayer and Torah reading, many made of silver and luxurious, adorned textiles). The Beth Tzedec location hosted school groups in its museum to

promote curiosity through art and artifact such as the adjacent Beit Alpha mosaic floor. Some of the locations welcomed groups into their lending libraries and into kitchens for hands-on learning of cooking and kashrut.

Dr. Nussbaum indicated that the familiarity and comfort and mutual reinforcement of the school and shul had a positive influence on the growth of the campus populations. He noted supportive overlaps between school, home, and shul in both stated and subliminal messages to the students. Anecdotally, he related that some of the children were so comfortable with the obvious overlap between their synagogues and USDS, that when asked where they went to school, they typically named the shul: “I go to Beth Tzedec,” or “Beth Tikvah,” or “Beit Rayim.” In other words, the housing of the schools together with the synagogues was beneficial in terms of the size of the school population and the mutual reinforcement of school, home, shul modelling, and messaging.

Dr. Nussbaum also pointed out ways in which the placement of each campus in a synagogue building was beneficial instrumentally. It meant that the director did not have to worry about the physical plant. The shuls looked after maintenance and cleaning, parking lots, and snow removal. The tuition could go right to school operating budgets and teaching salaries. The school director could concentrate on the educational procedures of the school and its teachers and learners: teaching and learning; wellbeing of the students; and family education by extension.

In addition to emphasizing authenticity, illustrated above in the context of modelling daily Jewish living, Dr. Nussbaum underscored several central educational decisions that he chose to guide the overall approach that he implemented at USDS from the start. In addition to the school's expressions of Judaism, these educational principles account for the major differences between USDS and other Toronto day schools. Broadly speaking, the principles that Dr. Nussbaum articulated coalesce as curriculum integration. Another overarching commitment that came into view as the interview proceeded is *kevod ha-beriyot*: abiding care for the self-esteem of each student.

Curriculum Integration

Fifty-fifty. One of Dr. Nussbaum's principles was to dedicate equal time to the teaching and learning of Jewish and general studies. Dr. Nussbaum added that nobody questioned the fifty-fifty ratio at the time and that he was staunch in maintaining it. Anecdotally, Dr. Nussbaum shared that he was less pleased, at the time, with the ratio of Jewish studies to general studies at CHAT, the community Hebrew high school in Toronto, where more time was spent on general studies than on Jewish studies. He initiated some interactions to probe the matter but did not manage to make headway.

Hebrew/Jewish Studies and General Studies: All Learning is Important. Dr. Nussbaum explained his deliberate choices of nomenclature for the two main strands intertwined in the curriculum: Hebrew and general studies. The term “Hebrew” encompassed all the Jewish studies and conveyed that the classes were conducted *ivrit be-ivrit*: Hebrew was the language of the materials, language of instruction, and language of communication. He was quite clear about his choice of the term general studies, and studiously avoided terms commonly used in some other schools, such as *limmudei* (literally, secular studies). His reasoning was to counter dichotomous thinking and to convey that *all* learning is important and valued in accordance with *mitzvat hinukh* (the commandment requiring teaching and learning: education). All learning contributes to the education and shaping of the Jewish people. He emphasized his commitment to the importance of intertwining general and Jewish curricular strands in the steps that he took, from the school’s inception and onward, to implement “curriculum integration.”

Since then, a defining feature of the Solomon Schechter Schools is articulated in the importance that the network attributes to curriculum integration. Dr. Nussbaum takes responsibility for coining the term “curriculum integration” when he was appointed to USDS. The concept spread across the Solomon Schechter Schools network through planned professional development sessions. The term itself passed into common parlance in the 1970s, adopted and spread by proponents such as Freidl Friedenreich and Batya Betteman; and its practices were brought to additional North American Jewish day schools, particularly those that functioned as community day schools to serve families across a wide spectrum of Jewish living.

During the interview, Dr. Nussbaum offered exemplars of curriculum integration in several spheres: hiring practices; learning in action; productive curricular cross-overs; expressly Jewish *and* civic attentions in celebrating and commemorating historical and religious events and occasions.

Interviewing and Hiring Practices. In interviewing personnel for the growing school, Dr. Nussbaum looked for teachers whose experiences were fitting for the curriculum integration approach. In the early years, he remarked that with rare exception, every staff member was either observant in terms of Jewish living, or Zionist in the sense of positively supportive of the existence and growth of the State of Israel. The initial gym instructor, for example, was a Hebrew-speaking teacher from Vilna. Until his departure to pursue full-time graduate studies, all gym classes were conducted only in Hebrew! That included everything from basic calisthenics and team sports to the synchronized, school yard flag parade on Yom Ha’atzmaut (Independence Day).

A feature that distinguished USDS from some of its counterparts was evident in hiring conventions. USDS insisted on up-to-date, teacher-educated general studies

teachers who were certified by the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT). Dr. Nussbaum made special mention of Bayla Chaikoff z.l., a teacher who was instrumental in setting the professional tone of the teaching staff and setting out the earliest documented versions of the general studies curriculum. As time passed, the school also made a point of hiring certified Hebrew (i.e., Jewish studies) teachers who were graduates of recognized teacher education programs. These include graduates of York University's Jewish Teacher Education Program who hold several credentials, including a bachelor of arts (honours), bachelor of education, an advanced certificate in Hebrew and Jewish studies, and OCT certification. These also include graduates of Israel's teacher education institutions who hold a *teu'dat hora'ah*: teaching certification granted by the Ministry of Education in Israel. The former are valued for their education and for the likelihood that they understand the backgrounds and mentalities of North American students. The latter are valued for their education and for their strength in integrating the language and culture of Israel in the Jewish studies fibre of the curriculum and school environment. Such a mixture of certified Jewish studies teachers on staff is valued so that the students benefit from a collage of approaches and strengths during their time at the school.

In contrast to his peers at some other area day schools over the years, Dr. Nussbaum refrained, by and large, from engaging superannuated teachers. He sought to hire individuals who were au courant with contemporary educational developments and teaching methodologies, as well as in touch with the world views and realities of contemporary Canadian children.

Learning in Action. One of Dr. Nussbaum's principles guided teachers to actualize learning by applying what he calls "learning in action." To bring lesson and unit plans to life, in his view, meant ensuring that lesson/unit delivery had an experiential component: *doing* alongside *learning about*. As an example, Dr. Nussbaum spoke of the grade 4 unit on "My Neighbourhood." In addition to activities or assignments that related to the students' home surroundings, he ensured that the unit included a field trip to a Kensington Market synagogue and surroundings, as Kensington is one of Toronto's earliest Jewish neighbourhoods. He wanted students to find out about the development of the Jewish community and its centres of gravity, such as the homes, shuls, and businesses in the neighbourhood. This instance of learning in action actively attends to both Jewish and general aspects. In Dr. Nussbaum's words: *all* learning is important.

Productive Curricular Crossovers. Dr. Nussbaum offered examples of curriculum integration implemented in the school's various divisions. In the intermediate grades, for example, where the Jewish studies curriculum called for learning about the Shoah and the Second World War, the grade 7 English Language Arts and Social Studies units included the reading and discussion of *The Diary of Anne Frank* in its historical context. This is an instance of the general studies curriculum used, by de-

sign, as a vehicle to broaden learning: in this case, learning the history of the Jewish people; issues of antisemitism; of adolescent development; and, of course, world history and literature. A similar approach was applied to the delivery of the grade 8 unit on Zionism and Israel, a part of the Jewish studies curriculum. Some of the content was interpolated in the social studies units of the general studies curriculum.

Clearly Dr. Nussbaum was well ahead of the curve of the Ontario Ministry of Education's model of "Partners in Action" as a pragmatic and generative model for collaborative curriculum delivery from teachers' points of view. Further, the approach makes sense from the point of view of students, whose brains are not divided into strict disciplinary compartments. As meaning-making people, students naturally make lateral, multidisciplinary connections that reinforce learning. Curriculum integration provides them with a ready forum of curricular crossover to do so.

Complementary Curriculum. Dr. Nussbaum described how in the intermediate grades (6–8), to extend *Humash* learning and analytical skills for maturing youth, the students had a second, higher-level pass at the books of *Breshit* (Genesis) and *Shmot* (Exodus). Their earlier learning of these *humashim* had taken place in grades 2 through 4. Curriculum integration at this intermediate stage included some comparative and analytical study. In addition to revisiting the content and structure and *parshanut* (commentaries; interpretations) of the Creation in *Breshit*, grade 8 students met and studied a couple of creation narratives and foundation myths of Mesopotamian cultures: for example, the teachers introduced the creation myth of *Enuma Elish* and the Gilgamesh epics to the students through the work of Nahum Sarna and the Melton Bible curriculum. The students sharpened their higher-level thinking skills through analysis and evaluation. They compared and contrasted the narratives, assessed the messages inherent in their content and structures, and articulated hypotheses of their purposes.

Marking Occasions: Jewish and Civic Attention in Ceremonies, Celebrations, and Commemorations. Dr. Nussbaum guided the teaching staff to implement curriculum integration in planned components of ceremonies, celebrations, and solemn commemorations. In marking Remembrance Day, he pointed out that the assemblies included recognition and collective remembrance of Canadians who had been involved in the World Wars, including Jews who had served in the armed forces and those whose lives had been affected by the wars. He encouraged the teachers to make links between principles in marking Canada's Remembrance Day and those in commemorating Israel's Yom HaZikaron (Memorial Day) prior to Yom Ha'atzmaut (Independence Day). As a result, the school community enacted collective memory practices to honour the members of all those who had fallen or exerted themselves while defending and protecting the people of Canada and the State of Israel throughout history.

All told, Dr. Nussbaum's legacy of curriculum integration was a guiding principle for the school with far-reaching implications for the thinking of teachers and learners at USDS.

Kevod ha-Briyot: Care for Children's Self-Esteem

Heterogeneous Grouping. Another principle that the founding director implemented alongside Curriculum Integration was geared toward promoting the positive self-esteem of the students and made an impression on the teachers, too. He categorically dismissed the possibility of streamed classes. Instead, he insisted on heterogeneous classes that were coed and balanced academically across the grade. In addition to stipulating that learners of all academic levels could and should learn together, pray together, and play together, Dr. Nussbaum's heart went out to students whose self-esteem could be harmed through labelling. "Can you imagine," he asked incredulously, "knowing you are placed in the lowest-level grade 1 class?!" One of the consequences of this policy was that teachers, of necessity, became more adept over time at differentiating instruction to meet the needs of a wide range of learners.

No academic rituals to single students out. Out of similar concern for the dignity of each student, Dr. Nussbaum kept the school free of academic rituals and markers that had become commonplace elsewhere. There were to be no classroom rosters on display for academic achievement, showing gold stars or vacant spaces beside students' names. By design, there was no principal's honour list. At graduation there was no valedictorian and no awarding of prizes that singled people out in terms of receiving, or not receiving them. The whole graduating class was celebrated.

USDS Graduates: Critical-Analytical Thinking

We asked Dr. Nussbaum what distinguished USDS graduates from their peers. In reply, he related a conversation that he had held with a director of education at CHAT. The response was that the CHAT teachers could usually tell the difference among the students at the various feeder schools by the way they functioned in the Tanakh classes. While certain schools' graduates were recognizable because of their breadth of knowledge, covering many books of the Bible, or their Israeli Hebrew pronunciation and vocabulary, or other distinctive signs, experienced educators recognized USDS graduates for the critical-analytical quality and depth of their questions and suggestions, particularly in textual studies such as Bible, Mishnah, and Gemara.

Learning: A Community and Family Affair

At this point in the interview, we invited Dr. Nussbaum to outline some of the teaching and learning he does currently. He still prepares six(!) *shi'urim* (lectures on Torah) each week. Two sessions are for community groups whose members meet weekly in

a synagogue setting and/or online for Bible and Talmud study. For decades he oversaw Toronto's only trans-denominational Bible study group: the *Hug Ha-Tanakh*. He passed its organization on to one of the interviewers in the last five years or so. He still attends and is actively involved as the group's senior educator.

The remaining sessions are for members of his family. Dr. Nussbaum studies *be-hevruta* with his sons-in-law and teaches some of his great grandchildren. He was proud to show off the gift of a beautiful, artistically rendered family tree and indicate that his great grandchildren numbered in the high twenties at the time of the interview: *ken yirbu* (may they continue to proliferate). For his sons-in-law, the materials are usually books of the Bible and their messages, to balance out the emphasis in their formal education on *Sifrut Hazal* (largely Talmud and legal material), that makes up the curriculum of the traditional yeshivot.

He shared how much he has been enjoying sessions with a great-granddaughter on the scroll of Ruth. They learn, they laugh, and enjoy each other's company. She is no stranger to Bible and enjoys this special learning time with her great grandfather. When her mother asked how it was going and probed her daughter's positive answer, the child explained spontaneously, "Sabba allows questions."

Sabba Allows Questions

This response took our breath away. As the folk wisdom of Jewish educators goes, "Rather than ask your children what they learned today in school—of course they'll say, 'Nothing'—ask them if they raised any good questions today." We don't need fancy degrees in education to know that teachers' adrenaline flourishes when students pose good questions. Midrash conceives of pupils' questions as kindling for their educators' passion for teaching. Jewish learning has been modelled on this principle and practice of give and take through the honing of questions and formulation of plausible answers, throughout the ages, both in the academies and in print. The Passover Haggadah, for example, is built on questions and answers derived from *midreshei halakha*, deposited in writing. It includes, among much else, a famous set of Four Questions, to be asked during seders by children of all ages, to invite a detailed telling. Dr. Nussbaum's prescient great-granddaughter—a middle child among four of his great-grandsons—put her finger on the mindset and influential legacy of her great-grandfather in Jewish education in Toronto. Dr. Aaron Nussbaum encourages and values astute questions.

***Mashal, le-mah ha-davar domeh?* (A Parable: Allegory and Interpolation)**

To conclude the interview, we asked what Dr. Nussbaum is most proud of at USDS. He replied readily with a *mashal* (parable). After all, he is first and foremost a *melamed* at

heart.⁴ Dr. Nussbaum related an allegory about a scholar who used to rush through his Friday night *se'udah* (meal) in order to return as quickly as possible to learning his texts—Talmud, legal codes, and so on. The people at the Shabbat table made efforts to have him linger over each course, join in the *zemirot* (Sabbath songs), and to make his time at the family table enjoyable. Dr. Nussbaum's *nimshal* (interpretation) was a message derived from the teachings of his beloved Esther's distinguished Bobover Hasidic family. It is a message that the couple prized for their extended family, and for Jewish education: that is, in all the Yiddishkeit in which we are involved daily, we should be helping each other live life *be-simhah* (happily). Essentially, our habitat of Yiddishkeit should be joyful. Dr. Nussbaum extended his message with an acknowledgment of the *esprit de corps* of the USDS staff: "We all tried to make Jewish learning pleasant for the students, in a pleasant atmosphere."

The interviewers, both of whom worked at USDS for many years, can attest that Dr. Nussbaum succeeded. Both interviewers are very appreciative and proud to have been mentored by Dr. Nussbaum and the cadre of accomplished colleagues he assembled and guided between the early 1960s and his retirement in January 1994.

Laura Wiseman, schooled at McGill University, Hebrew University, and the University of Toronto, worked at USDS for twenty-one years as Hebrew/Jewish studies teacher, vice principal, campus principal, and director of Jewish studies for the three-campus, 1450-student population. Wiseman subsequently worked at the Board of Jewish Education, taught TaNaKh at CHAT, and earned a PhD in Hebrew Language and Literature from the University of Toronto, with a collaborative doctorate in Jewish studies. Currently Wiseman is professor of education and humanities, specifically Jewish studies, at York University, and is the Koschitzky Family Chair in Jewish Teacher Education.

Jack Lipinsky, who earned a PhD in history at the University of Toronto and holds a BEd from York University's Faculty of Education, taught at USDS for twenty-six years in both general and Jewish studies. He then taught at Associated Hebrew Day Schools for nine years where, among other roles, he served as the founding chair of the Department of Jewish History and Identity. Together with colleagues Donnie Friedman and Meir D. Balofsky, Lipinsky authored *Telling Our Story: A History of the Jews in Canada to 1920* (2004), which serves students in many of Canada's Jewish day schools. Lipinsky now works as a facilitator and curriculum writer for Facing History and Ourselves. He continues to publish in the field of Canadian Jewish history.

1

We thank our colleague, Netta Zweig, for this apt term. “Jewish life competencies” elevates “Jewish life skills”—a previous standby—to a more conscious and deliberate level for educators, learners, and families.

2

United Synagogue Day School (USDS) is the foundational forerunner of Robbins Hebrew Academy, the contemporary day school now housed in Beth Tzedec.

3

See Jeremiah 2:2.

4

Etymologically, a *melamed* is “one who teaches.” Grammatically formulated in this specific Hebrew paradigm, the word conveys “one who causes others to learn.” Dr. Nussbaum is the consummate teacher. He models learning in the presence of learners and in that way causes and encourages people to learn.