

How Schools Enact Their Jewish Missions
20 Case Studies of Jewish Day Schools

A Project of the AVI CHAI Foundation

A “Modern Paradox”
School
Stays True
to Its Mission

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Overview

How can a Modern Orthodox school maintain its religious boundaries even as it serves a diverse population in one of the most boundary-breaking parts of the country? For the Oakland Hebrew Day School, the answer is: unapologetically. This case study explores the three major principles the school follows to help young students work through the formation of Jewish identities without surrendering to irrelevance or “fear-based Judaism.”

Where Bay Area Culture and Geography Are Celebrated, Not Feared

This is the counterintuitive story of a Modern Orthodox school whose unique strength resides in a modern paradox: The school expresses its deep Jewish mission by embracing the non-Jewish world.

With intermarriage rates the highest in the nation at well over 60 percent, and with local Jewish newspaper headlines proclaiming, “Mixing It Up: Why Non-Jews Choose Jewish Day Schools,”¹ the San Francisco Bay Area does not at first seem a conducive setting for Jewish day school education, let alone a Modern Orthodox day school. One Modern Orthodox school is not only *not* threatened by the intensely inclusive and universalistic values of the Bay Area, but it has also thoroughly appropriated the values into its school culture. To some degree, the project of religious purposefulness—namely, a conscious enactment, or *kavanah*, of Jewish tradition in one’s own life—is always a countercultural challenge in the context of our contemporary social reality. It is these very sensibilities that make the school’s unique and successful version of Jewish religious purposefulness possible.

Nestled in the rolling green Berkeley Hills of northern California is Oakland Hebrew Day School, where 174 students in grades K–8 busily walk the halls of the 10-year-old, three-story building. OHDS offers frequent reminders of the geographic location. The most vivid is on the third floor, where the wall of windows in the *Beit Midrash* (Jewish house of study) grants majestic views of the San Francisco Bay, complete with the

Golden Gate Bridge. A recent day was gloriously clear, and the whole Bay Area seemed to flow freely into the room as a group of middle school girls engaged in morning *tefillah*.

The view from the outside is equally inviting. The campus provides outdoor green spaces for play and gardening as well as a hard-top courtyard and basketball court on the roof. Indeed, the school’s very physical boundaries are powerfully permeable. Its friendly neighbors, all within walking distance, include a regional park, a wooded area owned by a church, and a non-Jewish senior center. They all serve as extended venues for OHDS students and teachers to explore nature and environmental preservation as well as *chesed* (the Jewish value of kindness and magnanimity) projects.

The school’s senior leaders are the head of school, the administrative director, the director of development, the director of admissions, the Judaic studies principal, the general studies principal, the front office manager, and the school psychologist. The Executive Leadership Team is a subgroup focused on instruction; the team includes the head of school, the two principals, and the middle school coordinator.

Teachers and administrators alike give off a professional but never corporate vibe. Dress ranges from business casual to the head’s jacket and tie. Although many female staff members dress in a classically Orthodox manner (long skirt, head covering), some wear shorter skirts and dresses and no head covering, and some wear slacks. All Jewish males wear *kippot*, whether they teach Jewish or general studies, and students do as well. Students address adults as “Mr.,” “Mrs.,” or “Rabbi,” plus their surname. Some Judaic teachers are called “*Morah*” (teacher) plus first name, as is the practice in Israel.

Because of its airy design coupled with the friendly children and adults who inhabit it, the OHDS facility embodies a kind and cheerful openness, inside and out. Indeed, it all feels strikingly effortless and natural. This is no show. This is how the school’s culture functions all day, all week, all year.

Visitors to the school are greeted warmly, signed in securely, and welcomed into the front office, a kind of Grand Central Station. It’s staffed by Noël, the front office manager, who for 10 years has facilitated the daily flow of people and needs, handled minor nursing tasks, and provided a time-out space

¹ *Jewish News Weekly of Northern California*, January 2012.

for occasional behavior infractions. A part-time receptionist assists her. The front office also houses the director of admissions, a polished, stylish spokeswoman who engages prospective parents articulately and persuasively with a unique combination of class and warmth. A few steps further in is the head of school's office, humble but spacious, with a desk and round meeting table covered with papers and student work. The office is typically empty; he's usually out meeting with teachers in their classrooms, engaging in fund-raising all over the Bay Area, or traveling to Washington, D.C. or Israel. When he does sometimes sit down in his office, he's often meeting with students, parents, and board members; taking phone calls; or somehow finding time to write.

The three floors contain classrooms, with the youngest kids on the first floor, grades 3–5 on the second floor, and middle school on the third. Classrooms open off a central hallway. The walls are filled with original student work and group installations that present what the children are learning in both general and Judaic studies. The school weaves art into all areas of study as a key mode of expression, like public speaking and writing. There are dedicated spaces for the *Beit Midrash*, art, library, computers, and science, plus a multipurpose space near the kitchen.

For all but the kindergarteners, the school day is divided in half between general and Jewish studies. For younger grades, the two teachers share one classroom. These classes are full of artifacts from both curricula as well as examples of how the general and Jewish programs have been integrated, or at least coordinated. For instance, there are ancient Egyptian tombs created by the history class studying the Exodus and ancient Egypt.

OHDS was founded in the early 1990s by four Modern Orthodox Jewish families and their rabbi to serve the mission that greets each person who enters the building. The mission is painted in playful, wavy sentences joining a girl and a boy in the shape of trees that have Hebrew and English alphabets running up and down their trunks. The statement makes it clear that OHDS's vision is both expansive and inclusive:

Oakland Hebrew Day School is a Modern Orthodox Jewish day school providing excellence in Jewish education to the entire Jewish community. Our focus is on the needs of

the whole child, fostering a love of learning and a strong sense of Jewish identity. We place equal emphasis on Judaic and general studies. We also recognize the significance of the State of Israel and we seek to inspire in our students an attachment to its people, as well as a sense of responsibility for their welfare. We instill the *middot* (character) and critical thinking skills necessary for our students to become tomorrow's Jewish leaders.

Just as the mission says, OHDS does, indeed, serve the *entire Jewish community*. Jewish families in this East Bay area have a choice of three day schools—the Modern Orthodox OHDS and two other nondenominational Community schools. Yet OHDS demographics include a population of tremendous religious and cultural diversity:

- Only 30 percent of students come from Orthodox-affiliated and practicing homes.
- Another 20 percent come from homes that also affiliate with Orthodox synagogues but do not practice as Orthodox Jews.
- The other 50 percent are a combination of families affiliated with Reform, Renewal, and “right-wing” Conservative synagogues. Some are unaffiliated as well, such as a group of secular Russian-born Jews who seek to relate to being Jewish through culture and holidays; and some Israelis, who are drawn by the school's commitment to Zionism, Israel, and Hebrew language.

“Keeping it real” Jewishly is challenging even under homogeneous conditions; pursuing a Jewish religious purposefulness in light of such wide diversity might seem next to impossible. But OHDS is committed to striving for precisely this, with all its diversity and never in spite of it.

Two Examples of the Quest for Religious Purposefulness

There are many ways that *religious purposefulness* can be manifest in a culture. For some, it looks like conscious mindfulness; for others, it is a zealous adherence to group norms; for others still, it appears as intense emotions, so strong that people may be moved to tears. For Jewish day schools, identifying and developing one version of religious purposefulness is often a daunting and elusive goal. The leaders at OHDS will all tell

you, very humbly, that what they do is a constant work in progress. But what makes the school a valuable model from which to learn is, in part, their very recognition that it takes an ongoing process of consciously and intentionally wrestling to achieve this important attribute of Jewish educational culture.

Visitors to OHDS will find that its version of religious purposefulness involves constant striving for alignment and interaction among their multiple and sometimes competing Jewish and secular ideals. Eschewing all taboos, leaders are determined to make any questions kosher for the asking, even on the hot topics of evolution, homosexuality, and divine authorship of the Bible. By making emotional and intellectual scrutiny open and safe, OHDS manages to “keep it real.” Neither students nor adults need check their true selves at the school door, whatever those personal selves and histories may be. Importantly, there are clear school norms, but even within the school’s religious boundaries, rigorous exploration and authentic identity formation can occur. Three principles inform OHDS culture and allow it to navigate the treacherous waters of religious purposefulness with remarkable success:

1. Clear boundaries
2. Trust with respect
3. Collaboration

These principles are pervasive and overlapping at OHDS. They seem, again and again, to serve as the basis for keeping Jewish living and learning real for the American Jews who go there.

Before analyzing the three principles individually, it is helpful to first observe them in dynamic interaction, *in vivo*. Consider, then, two examples of religious purposefulness in action at OHDS. They are reflections of two Jewish studies educators, each one illustrating what it means to them to guide their students’ authentic religious development.

The first, from a kindergarten teacher, offers a view of the youngest children as they express their ideas about God. The second, from the director of Jewish studies, shows the school’s oldest students, middle schoolers, defining their aspirations for meaningful *tefillah* and assessing their group’s current prayer services in that light. The two anecdotes illustrate the increasing complexity of developing religious purposefulness

as students get older. The stories also show what it looks like when observant Jewish educators who are reflective about their own religious development use that awareness to open their students’ thinking and challenge them to grow. Both these educators strive to keep it real when it comes to religious purposefulness. Both refuse to accept anything less than the students’ genuine thoughts and convictions.

In kindergarten

I love talking to these kids about the world, about God, about holiness. At one point, I wondered, “How am I going to teach about God?” But the kids all knew, they all know, instinctively. I need to listen to them about who God is, what God is. Here’s a book they wrote that I’d like to publish. It’s called *The Hashem Book*. All I had to ask was, “What do you know about Hashem?” and they illustrated their answers. For example, look at these pages:

God is 1.

Hashem loves the world.

Hashem tells us the good things to do.

Hashem is hidden.

Hashem has healing powers.

Hashem is still creating.

Hashem is always with us.

Hashem is real.

We use *Hashem* because God is so beyond names. But if it’s during *tefillah*, we use God’s real name, because then, it’s real.

The teacher, Tamar Bittleman, finds that keeping it real comes naturally in kindergarten. She discovers that simply by asking the question “What do you know about *Hashem*?” she is able to elicit rich and authentic responses from her five-year-old Jewish theologians. Impressively, her students produce an array of complex theological notions, including ethical monotheism, and various notions of God that are mystical, imminent, interventionist, or non-interventionist-Kaplanian! To all of them, though, as one student put it, God is *real*.

But God becoming real does not happen by accident, or merely by listening, as the teacher states so modestly. Rather, she actively provides a specific classroom culture where

the “plausibility structure”² is clear and offers special names for various realities. When talking *about* God, they use a less sacred placeholder name for God, *Hashem* (literally, *the Name*). When talking *to* God, during prayer, God’s actual and sacred name is invoked: *Adonai*. What this teaches about religious purposefulness, then, doesn’t just concern different names for God. Instead, students learn about the importance of creating real worlds, modeled by adults. In each of these worlds are different behavioral rules and, in this case, different ways of relating to God.

Those kindergarten students respect those rules and take them seriously. If God is real (and to them, He is), it is rude to refer to Him in the third person (as *Hashem*) when speaking to Him, and it is likewise inappropriate to address God on a first-name basis (with *Adonai*) in the mundane realm. This is an aspect of religious purposefulness that these kindergarten students learn from their teacher. She makes it look easy, but to pull off this pedagogical feat, she enacts the three OHDS principles for facilitating religious purposefulness.

1. She must provide **clear boundaries** (when to use *Hashem* and when to use *Adonai*).
2. She needs to establish mutual **respect** and gain her students’ **trust** that what she says and does is, in fact, real.
3. She needs to work in **collaboration** with them to create knowledge about God, allowing them to invest and participate in the constructivist process.

Ultimately, by acknowledging that the students live in multiple worlds with multiple rules, as Jews and as Americans, too, the kindergarten teacher helps them to navigate those competing realities.

In middle school

“I can’t make or force you into a relationship with God, but we have to be aware of our relationship with each other. You [one student] may not care about *tefillah*, but clearly,

² This is sociologist Peter Berger’s classical term for socially constructed and socially maintained realities of religious communities or “worlds.” Berger asserts that “each world requires a social ‘base’ for its continuing existence as a world that is real to actual human beings. This ‘base’ may be called its plausibility structure.” (*The Sacred Canopy*, p. 45).

Yakira [another student] does, and you are showing disrespect to her, and that I *can’t* accept.”

This is what I hear myself telling my middle schoolers.

For example, we just had a conversation with sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade girls. Something just didn’t feel right, so I stopped *tefillah* the other day, and I wrote a question on the board:

“What is *tefillah*? How would you define *tefillah* for you and for the community?”

I told them, “Come up to the board when you are ready and write your answers.”

They wrote good answers—they know what to say—plus it was public, of course.

So I told them, “I’m not surprised by what you’re writing. I know you all have an amazing *neshama* [soul], but what you write on the board is not happening. So how can we translate what is on the board to what we do?”

The following *tefillah* session was a Torah reading day, so I used the *drash* [explication of weekly Torah portion] time after Torah reading to come back to our conversations, and they came up with different ideas. In fact, in between, Chris [a middle school English teacher] even told me that he overheard one of the girls saying, “Guys, we don’t do *tefillah* this way, remember...” So we talked about the rights of the *kahal* [congregation].

Then, in a third session, this was just last week now, I told them, “We’re going to have to think this through for next year, and what that’s going to take. Let’s have a few people work with me on a *tefillah* committee.” I thought a few kids would raise their hands, but *eight* girls offered to be on a committee with me.

By middle school, the goal has not changed: It is still to make it real. But as kids get older, the struggle becomes clear. *Tefillah* may feel routine, even rote. Children’s early, simple faith is, naturally, complicated by questions and doubts. The problem is how to keep it real developmentally throughout the ages and stages. The Jewish studies director, Bat Sheva Miller, struggles mightily to maintain relevance with her early teens (11- to 13-year-olds). Now, the students push back on the plausibility

structure (Jewish prayer) in complex ways. She knows this and, importantly, reflects it back to them. But she does so by maintaining clear boundaries, blending trust with respect, and encouraging collaboration.

Working to maintain the plausibility structure (and maintain clear boundaries) of what constitutes *tefillah* at OHDS, Miller make two cases to her students.

1. **She appeals to their secular, universal value of respect and applies it to Jewish prayer.** In doing so, she honors both secular and Jewish sensibilities in a subtle but significant act of integration of respect and *kavod*. Regardless of whether individual students find religious purposefulness in a task, they learn that it is never acceptable to interfere with someone else's religious purposefulness.³ The breach of this particular norm is named directly and redressed, not ignored or glossed over. Indeed, to do so would fail to keep it real.
2. **She works to maintain the integrity of *tefillah*'s religious purposefulness by turning attention directly to the breach of the *tefillah* norm.** Indicating that this is important enough to interrupt *tefillah*, she takes time from the regular practice and, collaboratively, invites students to offer their own understandings of what *tefillah* is, ideally. Not surprisingly, she receives what she calls "good responses." They knew she trusted them to do so, and in turn, respected the task.

But then, to maintain authenticity of practice and keep it very real, Miller proceeds with something more radical. Knowing that this public interview about *tefillah* was bound to yield answers the students knew the teacher desired, she exposes the contradiction between what they *reported* *tefillah* should be and how they actually *enacted* *tefillah*. She will not accept a compromised or pretend religious purposefulness.

Yet even here Miller does not stop. She takes her intervention one step further. After naming the disparity between ideal and practice, she goes on to propose a formal, systemic, concrete response to investigate what can be done about the disparity. As such, this discrepancy has also been framed as a problem,

³ That there are always at least some students who find meaning in the plausibility structure is an important aspect of OHDS culture that makes the strategy successful in that diverse population.

one that belongs to the community collectively. She expects a few volunteers to raise their hands. But as noted earlier, those eight girls, fully a third of the class, volunteer to work on a "*tefillah* committee" to investigate this problem. As it turns out, more students than she ever expected accept her invitation to participate and wish to maintain the school's plausibility structure. What began as a breach of religious purposefulness becomes a chance to create a deeper religious purposefulness. It is not clear what will unfold, but Miller trusts herself, the students, the process, and her colleagues. Addressing the problem directly becomes, in itself, an example of religious purposefulness. As this articulate Jewish studies director puts it, "Working through the problem or challenge of religious purposefulness is part of the religious purposefulness."

Three Principles for Successful Struggling: How OHDS Navigates the Treacherous Waters of Religious Purposefulness

As Miller well knows, the act of working through such problems is complex. But it might be one of the most important things she does as a Jewish educational leader. OHDS maneuvers sensitively and wisely through the challenges to religious purposefulness by relying on three pervasive principles at the core of its culture: clear boundaries, trust with respect, and collaboration.

1. Clear Boundaries

It is worthwhile to state what may be obvious: All families who choose OHDS, and whom OHDS chooses, understand that they and their children are entering a contract with the school to receive a certain kind of Jewish experience. This commitment to fulfilling the OHDS Jewish mission is made clearly, without ambivalence or apologies. All stakeholders—including students, parents and families, teachers, administrators, and board members—accept that OHDS draws specific lines that demarcate what does and does not take place there Jewishly (and generally). When asked what allows OHDS to be so respectful and inclusive, many of its leaders and parents point to the critical function of this holding structure. Some do refer to it as a contract; others speak of it as the *hashkafa* (ideological perspective and practice). But all point to the boundaries that become the frame that enables safe and creative work to occur.

Practically speaking, this Jewish frame means all families knowingly sign up for the following:

- Living the rhythm of the Jewish calendar;
- Engaging and leading co-ed *tefillah* with Modern Orthodox *nusach* (order and melody of service) until middle school, when girls and boys do it separately;
- Allowing no mixed dancing, although mixed singing is acceptable;
- Giving maximal exposure to classical texts, from Torah through Talmud;
- Learning about and observing an array of ritual and ethical *mitzvot* (commandments) of daily life, including supervised *kasbrut*;
- Following mandatory dress standards (including *kippot* for boys, although *tzitziyot* are optional and worn by some boys, both inside and outside);
- Meeting serious goals of Hebrew fluency; and
- Committing to the Jewish people worldwide, with special emphasis on Israel.

The frame also means that students will be educated by Judaic studies faculty members who are themselves role models of Modern Orthodox life; they are actively and positively engaged in their own religious practice, ongoing learning, and spiritual development.

Significantly, this frame is enforced with love, care, and dignity, not fear or shame. As one teacher put it, “We’re not heavy-handed here, but it’s also clear that there is no waffling.” This is apparent from a simple moment one morning when the head of school gently taps a middle schooler on the shoulder while on the way to class and quietly reminds him to put on his *kippah*. The head trusted that the student bore no mal-intent. There is no public shame; indeed, it remains a private moment.

Even when the school’s norms are challenged directly, faculty are unabashedly willing to push students to wrestle with the frame and do not allow them to opt out of the struggle. One Jewish studies teacher offers an instructive comparison for addressing resistance to prayer:

What if a kid says “I don’t believe in algebra. I don’t want to do it”? That’s not OK; we wouldn’t accept that. Or what if a social studies teacher is not conflicted when a child says, “I don’t want to do this.” But some people feel that prayer is such a personal category that it shouldn’t be something someone *has* to do, that it’s different than algebra.

But I want to suggest that it is OK to say, “You *have* to have some kind of relationship with God,” or state it simply as a behavioral and curricular expectation. But with spiritual perspectives it’s different; there is confusion. I think it’s about how we relate to the words we say and the choices we make. There is no answer about “how to have a connection with God,” but we can bring [the students] close to the struggle. It is better to engage in the struggle. If I give them alternatives, and they can opt out, there is no struggle.

Another Jewish studies teacher similarly encourages struggle but draws on a different strategy. Here she discusses how she teaches that the Torah comes from Hashem.

First of all, I just say it: “Hashem gave the Torah.” We use the word Hashem a lot. “Why did Hashem write the *psukim* [Biblical verses] that way?” The underlying assumption is that *Hashem* wrote the Torah, but the focus of our activity is on interpretation. For example, when we study the laws of *kasbrut* and discover that there are four animals that share one sign of being kosher, the students wonder why that would be. Of course the kids challenge if Hashem wrote the Torah. My job is not to preach but to create opportunities for them to learn. [The challenge could be coming from] a kid who doesn’t believe in God, or whose parents don’t believe in God and it’s a value they’ve inherited, or kids who feel tensions at home. I try to get the kids to engage with each other and ask others who do, “Why do you believe in God?” And we talk about it.

It’s never, “That’s wrong.” No, no, I don’t think that’s effective. I think there’s a sleeper effect. We may not see the effects for years, but you never know what kind of effect you might have. Plus, that class is not the end of the conversation.

Note one trait shared by both of these teachers and many other faculty members at OHDS. They teach toward Jewish

identity formation knowing that identity is a moving target, fluid and unfolding. They know and believe that the conversation continues. This is a rare willingness and even commitment to let go of students as *products* and hold on to them carefully and closely as ongoing *works in progress*. The approach removes an enormously prevalent (and sometimes debilitating) anxiety among many Jewish studies day school teachers that Jewish continuity in America depends on them alone. It's an anxiety that causes them to experience challenges to Jewish life as massive threats instead of what the experiences truly are: daily moments of exploration in the formation of a child's unfolding Jewish identity.

Judging by the calm but rigorous and stimulating interactions in and out of class, students clearly notice and appreciate this. It provides respectful breathing space within the frame where they can explore who they genuinely wish to become as Jews.

Parents, too, value the clear frame, even in families that seem least likely to be candidates for a Modern Orthodox school. A case in point is a single mother with minimal Jewish background, few financial resources, unstable work, visible flower tattoos up and down her forearm, and some serious traumas in her past. She left the local Reform synagogue and Community liberal Jewish day school and brought her son and daughter to OHDS. Though one person warned her that she would not even be let in the door with her tattoos, she tried anyway. Not only were her children both accepted to the school, but within a year, she was recruited to be a co-chair of the Parents' Association. Here is how she explains the way OHDS has been able to meet her unique family's needs:

Here at OHDS, they're very solid and clear, not wishy-washy. They say, "We encourage you as a family to struggle with it." So we joined Beth Israel [a Modern Orthodox synagogue] from a Reform synagogue! OHDS is an extremely clear and individualized institution absolutely committed to and grounded in the vision. They are willing to be inclusive without compromising the core mission. I feel here that my kids' foundation is absolutely rock solid. Take modesty, for example. The dress code is so important for my sixth-grade daughter to wrestle with; she's a fashion goddess.

Also, there is a huge difference in how they do *tefillah* here. My kids came not knowing anything about a full *tefillah*. But at OHDS, like all the other kids, they rotated through leading *tefillah*. It takes us 45 minutes to get here, and when it was my daughter's turn to lead, she said, "Mom, we have to leave *now*, 'cause I have to lead *tefillah* today!" So *tefillah* is simply about "now we're doing this." It goes back to the leadership thing. If kids said, "I don't want to do *tefillah*," that's not an option; plus, they want to be ready to do it.

This culture in which people intensely value clear boundaries is surprising for a school in the Bay Area, a region known for boundary breaking, or at least boundary pushing. But at OHDS, boundaries serve as a means to an even higher end—namely, religious purposefulness.

2. Trust with Respect

What a vigilantly demarcated and continuously enforced frame allows is its opposite: flexibility, openness, and inclusivity. Within the OHDS frame is tremendous room for differentiating needs and for relating to all students and families on their unique Jewish journeys.

Melanie Marcus, OHDS' director of admissions, asserts the idea in boldly unequivocal terms:

We are unlike Chabad.... There is a big difference. Our goal is not to change anybody. We don't need them to be Orthodox. We want parents to grow spiritually, Jewishly, to be connected through knowledge. Parents may join a synagogue, they may start to light candles, one thing could lead to the next.

But Marcus goes on to say, "In order to be a future Jewish leader, students have to *have* text-based study and Israel education, fluency, and tools so that when they are grown up, they will have not only a voice but *everything* they need to decide what kind of Jew they want to be. We pass no judgment."

Notice the unlikely message this day school conveys: By holding on carefully to a shared framework lived *daily*, we are free to let go of the need to control or determine your Jewish *future*. This message requires school leaders to combine tremendous trust with respect for students and families as individuals.

But the message also earns the leaders trust with respect from students and families. This singular juxtaposition of frame and openness, of holding on and letting go, of structure and flexibility, further elucidates OHDS' contribution to the knowledge of how Jewish day schools can struggle successfully, and even joyfully. Making the link between a clear frame and trust transparent, Judaic studies director Batsheva Miller explains, "Everyone from our Charedi to our Reform rabbi teachers all need to know our *hashkafa*; it's the secret to holding the school, to maintaining a sense of trust."

This trust with respect is evident in a variety of ways, both Jewishly and generally, throughout the school and across stakeholders. For example, there is an open-door culture in classrooms. Students and teachers are accustomed to visitors who pop in and out regularly. Education scholar Kevin Ryan captures a stark truth about teaching with this dramatic maxim: "Teaching is the second most private activity that adults engage in." Open-door classrooms are a telltale sign that teachers feel safe and that teaching is treated as a public and collaborative act, not a private and isolated one. Trust makes this possible; the teacher must know she is not going to be evaluated by a supervisor looking to catch flaws and weaknesses. Teacher growth is expected, but it occurs in the context of a collaborative process of learning with peers and supervisors.

Moreover, the members of OHDS culture are not threatened by difference or diversity. On the contrary, there is a safe, supportive environment in which to express one's true, real self. On multiple occasions, independently of one another, interviewees proudly invoked this same metaphor: "We have no water-cooler culture here." They mean there is no gossiping. Office manager Noël Moritz, a practicing Presbyterian active in her church, says OHDS is "the most respectful place I've ever worked. Across the board, in Jewish and general studies, nobody is hanging around the water cooler." Moritz, who regularly encounters people from all corners of the school's culture, notes that "differences are honored, and when you feel that, you pass it on. It's OK to make a mistake, try something, and we'll deal with it if it doesn't work. Someone's got your back."

It is one thing to be trusted when the mistake concerns ordering the wrong notebooks or setting up for an event incorrectly, or when feeling it is OK to say, "I'm not able to teach because

of difficulties at home right now." But OHDS' culture of trust with respect also extends to errors that take place at the heart of the school's Jewish frame, or *hashkafa*.

Just such a test occurred in 2014 during the school's preparation for the *Yom Ha'Atzmaut* celebration. Bat Sheva Miller takes responsibility for what happened. Roving among the class preparations, she saw the edgy raps the middle schoolers were preparing. Although she warned the students that their music would not work for the younger kids, she decided to let them own their presentation rather than veto it. However, on the day of the celebration, something far more serious occurred. Bat Sheva describes it as a "flash mob dance":

It just happened, and parents, everyone, were dancing together, singing "*noladi po...*" I even participated in the dancing for a minute, then I stepped out and saw boys and girls dancing together. We never have mixed dancing. One teacher noticed it. I noticed it and faced it. I saw the rehearsals; I couldn't claim ignorance. I knew I had crossed the line. I *knew* where the school stands.

The first thing she did was call the school rabbi, Rabbi Dardik. Based outside the school, Dardik serves as a sort of consultant to OHDS, offering guidance and answers to questions from teachers, students, and parents. This unique arrangement provides relief to Head of School Potok, who is himself a rabbi. Miller told Dardik, whom she describes as a dear mentor and friend, with an amazing *neschama*: "I blew it and made a big mistake."

While validating her need to make it clear that boys and girls are to dance separately, Rabbi Dardik responded without alarm. He encouraged Miller to probe her own reaction, asking, "What are you concerned about? That you gave a mixed message?" The two analyzed the incident together, as partners with a shared mission. Miller wanted to know what to do now, if anything.

First, they knew they did not want any footage to go up online, so they told the kids not to put it on video or YouTube. Then, although they decided there was no need for an official public statement, she did email the whole faculty with a simple acknowledgment: "There has been no change of policy as far as mixed dancing is concerned at OHDS. Indeed there was

a glitch on Thursday. The flash mob slipped through in the excitement of *Yom Ha'Atzmaut* planning and preparation. I made a mistake, but that's what it was—simply an error and not a change in *Hashkafah*. The policy regarding group performances at school remains the same: Boys and girls are to dance separately, as we have always done and will continue to do....”

Trust provided this buffer for error and this calm and respectful process for redressing breaches. Trust allows OHDS teachers and learners alike to continue to take risks with teaching, learning, and Jewish living.

When asked about the school's atmosphere, time and again teachers and administrators attribute this strikingly supportive culture of trust to the Bay Area. They explain that the Bay Area is where people ventured to pioneer something new, be creative, and not feel afraid to take risks. Head of School Potok notes that trust begins at the very top, observing that “the board is comprised of very entrepreneurial families who are not afraid of experimentation and for whom failure means learning from a mistake, not getting fired. So it is an amazing environment to work in.”

3. Collaboration

Having a *trust-buffer* to encourage experimentation is not the only thing that makes OHDS an “amazing environment” to work in. This same cushion of trust with respect also becomes the basis for wanting to work as a team. Although many schools ask or expect their faculty to work as a team, OHDS faculty *want* to work together. Again, members of the OHDS culture keep it real by being internally motivated by intrinsic value, and not merely executing a task because of an extrinsic rule alone. In other words, the value is embedded in the culture and lived organically.

Of course, this does not happen automatically. Potok readily declares, “I would not hire a teacher who feels that teaching is a solo experience.”

Collaboration is a firmly established OHDS principle, one that teachers not only relish but also rely upon. From there, collaboration could become a natural and even reflexive move to what is often a most elusive goal for Jewish day schools:

meaningful integration.⁴ Integration, moreover, is in large part what ultimately keeps it real for American Jews.⁵ To be sure, integrating both curricular content and various aspects of learner identities is a conscious aspiration for OHDS, and this nurtures their particular and thriving expression of religious purposefulness.

In this light, all forms of collaboration become foundational investments in fostering religious purposefulness. At OHDS, as Office Manager Moritz nonchalantly reports, “it is not at all atypical for someone to have a free period and find another faculty member and ask, ‘Can I help you?’ ” That is a rare attribute of a school's culture. The rather singular professionals who make up the OHDS faculty get this way, the Head of School and administration explain, both because the school follows clear and specific hiring criteria and the school makes a conscious effort to socialize teachers into OHDS culture.

Here are other areas in which OHDS applies the collaborative approach.

- **Discipline.** The school employs a behavioral protocol with reflective prompts that the student uses to process the problem event and arrive, together with the teacher or administrator, at a shared description of what went wrong and how to repair the situation.
- **Creation of knowledge.** Thoroughly constructivist, the school is moving toward project-based learning in the sciences. In Jewish studies, too, though, students are considered partners, both with each other and with teachers. When five-year-old Noa's finger drifted away from the Hebrew word in the prayer *Adon Olam* that she was leading her class in singing, the incident became an invitation

⁴ There is an important curricular and leadership implication here. This may serve as a fascinating reversal to the conventional logic applied at many day schools—namely, that the practice of integration will (one hopes) necessitate collaboration. But OHDS' culture may explain why this hope is so often frustrated. When leaders first establish a structure in which teachers can collaborate, logistically and intellectually, it may pave the way for many forms of formal curricular and informal integration between Jewish and general content and skill sets. So OHDS helps us to revisit any assumptions that mandating integration will necessitate collaboration.

⁵ Modern American Jewish historian Jonathan Sarna asserts that “the most fundamental question of American Jewish life is how to live in two worlds at once, how to be both American and Jewish, part of the larger American society and apart from it” (Sarna, pp. 9–10).

to collaborate rather than a time to be corrected. First, the teacher asked Noa, “Shall we help you?” Hands flew up around the room, but the teacher turned to the other students and mused gently, “She didn’t even ask for help yet!”

Noa responded, “I need help finding my place.”

Her teacher gave her a choice: “You can decide if you want to keep looking or if you want to ask for help.”

Noa answered, “I need more help” and pointed to one of her many classmates who had their hands up, eager to help her. “Oren,” Noa said.

Oren instructed Noa, “Pretend to punch your stomach and it will remind you which sound the vowel makes.” [He was referring to the “oo” sound that begins the word Noa was looking for.]

After almost four minutes of these collaborations, Noa finds her place, and the singing of the prayer resumes spontaneously with no fuss, no shame. Upon completion of her leadership task, the teacher tells her, “Noa, what a strong leadership job that was. When you needed help, you asked and just continued on. Really good job.” After a handshake, Noa takes her place in the circle.

- **Projects with board members and donors.** Head of School Potok “thanks God” for a Core Development Leadership Team made up of some of the board members. They work together and with him to identify, cultivate, and solicit donors. Potok extends the value of collaboration even to his interactions with donors. “Donors *want* to know what’s going on, and when they feel like they are a part of *where* their money is going, they love it,” he says. “It’s about cultivating, cultivating relationships for a long time.”

With this high level of collaboration reaching across various groups of stakeholders, integration becomes virtually instinctive. General and Jewish studies teachers talk about how they strive for maximum collaboration and seek to avoid what they call *segmentation* whenever possible. They think consciously about integrating the whole student as a whole person. Along with the core faculty in general and Jewish studies, specialty staff who teach drama, art, athletics, computer classes, and library skills also try to integrate whenever possible.

“As much as we can, we try to provide time to collaborate,” Potok explains. Every all-school event is gauged by its integrative potential. For example, the school looks at Earth Day and Civil Rights/America Day from both Jewish and American perspectives to explore the impact of freedom of speech on Jewish history.

But integration is not merely thematic. Since Potok arrived at the school, he has been interested in finding points of integration where *skills* overlap, too. For example, English and Hebrew teachers share a composition rubric for writing papers in either language. “We are always looking for where these connections can be made, but not in contrived or forced ways,” Potok says. Again, they are determined to keep it real.

One Jewish text teacher did this when she led her students to an aha moment about how the text applies to their lives. In discussing the Jewish legal ruling about building a fence on a roof, she invited students to consider how this might have affected the social studies teacher who recently fell off the stage and broke two vertebrae. She recounts their enthusiasm as they discovered how Jewish law could have prevented the painful accident, since there would have been a fence.

Offering a larger-scale, systematic example of integration in Jewish studies is the general studies director, Tania Schweig. Always—or “obsessively,” as she puts it—looking for ways to help students make connections, she recently gave her general studies faculty a challenge: to apply the sophisticated hermeneutics that Jewish text courses use to their reading of English literature. Schweig labels the first- through fifth-grade secular reading and writing program called “Junior Great Books” as “really *Jewish*.” She explains:

[In that program] you read, reread, and then read again. And the curriculum only selects books which are open-ended. You read three times and then come up with questions, ending up with shared inquiry and a Socratic discussion style which pushes students to look for evidence from the text to support their thinking. And it’s so obviously Jewish. When we had a Junior Great Books trainer here, he was so envious of our multiple perspectives approach on a Jewish text. I want to bring that level of richness to our general studies. It’s a big goal of mine.

At its best, the collaboration that so often leads to integration at OHDS produces exciting moments. Schweig recalls an incident around a family's Shabbat table one night. A fourth-grade girl was teaching about the Torah, and her second-grade brother (both OHDS students) said she was wrong about something. The boy went for a book called *The Midrash Says* to check. Schweig was so happy that he went looking for confirmation that she later told the child, "That's called finding evidence from the text."

"I know that," the boy replied. "Where do you think I learned it from?"

Schweig explains that he was referring to the Junior Great Books curriculum. In the end, it turned out the boy was wrong, but that only strengthened the importance of his searching for evidence for his claim. Schweig recounts the story with pride, describing that she was gratified not only because this boy was using those skills but also because he was applying them from *general* studies to a *Jewish* context. At OHDS, healthy integration of whole American Jewish people entails integrating in both directions.

Struggling Smart: Learning from OHDS

OHDS seeks to narrow a seemingly intractable gap in American Jewish education: the relevance gap. Conscious dedication to bridging the gap among all things Jewish and non-Jewish results in playful, intentional, and thoughtful approaches to helping young Jews navigate their journeys toward Jewish identity formation. In short, OHDS "struggles smart" with religious purposefulness. The school's distinct version of this entails shunning taboos, shining light on conflict and confusion, making unlikely allies, and forming surprising bonds. It takes courage to remove barriers to unfettered exploration and to create links where there are usually stark divisions — all the while staying true to one's core principles. This is the courage of educational leadership that OHDS teaches is required to foster at least one version of religious purposefulness. Bat Sheva Miller summed it up best when she said, "What makes our school special is not that we do everything perfectly, but that we never stop trying."

No school, no matter how exemplary, lacks struggle and tensions. Indeed, some of the best schools are rife with tensions.

The question is, how well does the school manage the tensions? A culture that renders tensions productive, creative, and even inspiring can yield greater religious purposefulness than a culture whose tensions enervate the school community, cause shame about failure, and at times leave scars. OHDS manages its religious purposefulness tensions with alacrity, grace, and imagination.

OHDS also navigates these challenges with a notable absence of defensiveness or apologetic tone. Perhaps what makes religious purposefulness the bane of many Jewish day schools' existence (particularly in the context of *tefillah*) is what a number of teachers at OHDS refer to as *fear-based Judaism*. For them, this fear is three-fold: fear of other, fear of losing Jews, and the fear of intermarriage. As one Jewish studies teacher said, almost prophetically, "If we are motivated by fear, then the school is lost. Fear doesn't work for teaching or learning."

For teachers at OHDS, the alternative to fear—as Californian as it may sound—is love. The word *love* is not a fluffy catch-all term but instead a serious practice. Religious purposefulness at OHDS stems from sincere caring for others as human beings with unique needs and interests.

It was love that, for example, motivated OHDS Jewish studies teacher Bethany Strulowitz to contact the "Zoo Rabbi" in New York City. Isaiah, one of her sixth-grade students, was frustrated with medieval Jewish commentator Rashi's lack of scientific awareness about birds. Strulowitz called Isaiah's mother to say, "Tell me about Isaiah. I need to understand him further." After speaking with the mother, she knew exactly what to do. She put Isaiah in touch with the Zoo Rabbi through the Internet and had Isaiah read the rabbi's books. Then, for the final sixth-grade project, she had Isaiah research the question, "What makes a bird kosher or not?"

OHDS' love-inspired religious purposefulness need not remain a West Coast anomaly. Originally from the Northeast himself, Potok has observed that people come to Northern California to "escape the past and create the future, to define themselves by what they are becoming... the past helps inform them as a blessing." There is a danger that OHDS' unique geographic and cultural setting will deter others from believing that the knowledge and wisdom they offer could apply elsewhere. But like any other kind of knowledge from an

outside source, what OHDS has learned can be translated to other people and places. If we let it, OHDS can serve as an ongoing laboratory experiment that—although performed under unique conditions—is valuable to learn from because it has produced a dramatic alternative to religious purposefulness that’s not motivated by anxieties about Jewish continuity.

It is possible to learn from OHDS a profound and counter-intuitive answer to the animating question, “How are some day schools able to stay true to their Jewish mission?” OHDS teaches that one way to remain close to your *Jewish* mission is

by being unafraid of the *non*-Jewish world. You can embrace things that are different and not feel threatened by them while drawing clear, unapologetic lines in the sand about who you are. You can hold clear boundaries just as near and dear as the values of openness and diversity. The goal is to manage and embrace secular culture, not silence or fear it.

When shared with Potok, this finding immediately reminded him of identity studies that show you can define yourself in one of two ways: by who you are or by who you aren’t.

OHDS manages to define itself by who it is.

Questions for Further Consideration:

1. What does religious purposefulness look like, sound like, and feel like at your school?
2. What is your school’s Jewish *hashkafa*, and who protects and guards it? What are the definitional lines in the sand that become boundaries of Jewish practice and living? Who holds those boundaries?
3. When lines get crossed or breaches occur, how does the community respond? How does the school heal from mistakes?
4. What is the relationship in your school culture between Jewish and general learning? Between Jewish and American values? How does your school navigate Halloween? Valentine’s Day? Christmas trees in some students’ homes? What messages does your school give, and how does the school communicate them?
5. If your students and teachers had thought bubbles above their heads during *tefillah*, what might they be thinking? What sorts of things do you hope would fill these thought bubbles, and how might you help bring your imagined ideals to reality?
6. What, if anything, is not named, scary, or difficult to talk about publicly and formally, especially when it comes to Jewish studies, Hebrew instruction, or *tefillah*? Do you know why these have become taboos for your school culture?

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