

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

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A Project of the AVI CHAI Foundation

# Renewing the Old and Sanctifying the New

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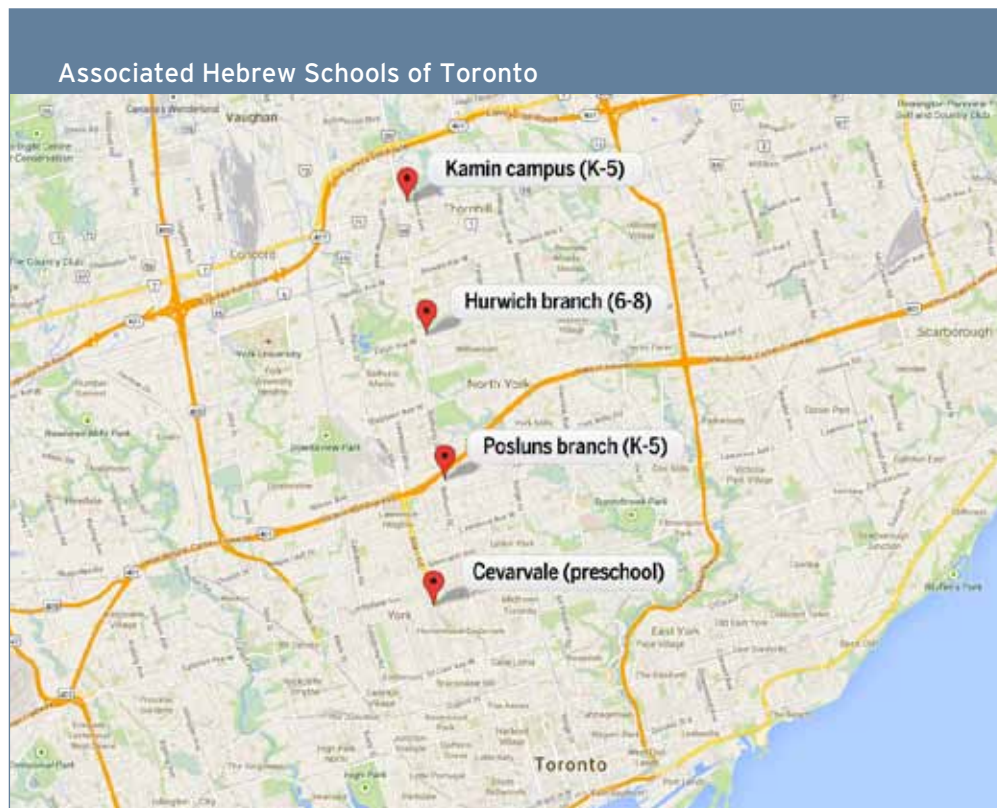


**In Toronto**, there are more than two dozen Jewish day schools in which some 11,000 children are enrolled: between a third and a quarter of all Jewish school-age students. This rate of enrollment, about double the norm in the United States, is one reason why Toronto has long been considered a day-school town.

The oldest of these schools is “Associated.” Founded as the city’s first Talmud Torah in 1907, the Associated Hebrew Schools of Toronto launched their first day school class in 1943. Today, wholly operated as a full-day private Jewish day school, Associated has been in continuous existence for more than 100 years. With an enrollment of 1,701, from nursery to 8<sup>th</sup> grade, this community school operates out of four branches strung out close to Bathurst Street, the main artery of Jewish life in Toronto. One branch — that opened for the first time in 2012 — operates a pre-school. Two branches, Posluns (serving the southern end of the Jewish community) and Kamin (serving the northern suburbs of the city) operate as nursery-grade 5 elementary schools. The Hurwich branch, located more or less midway between the other sites, serves as a grade 6–8 middle school.

In 2004, Dr. Mark Smiley was appointed the school’s Director of Education. Like many other Associated parents and teachers, Smiley is an alumnus of the school. Having served as Head of School at the Hillel Day School for 16 years, he took up the position following the retirement of Rabbi Avraham Sofer. Sofer, an Israeli educator, had been in the position for more than 25 years. When Smiley came in to the job, enrollment was in a state of continuous decline, having fallen from a peak of more than 3,000 students at the start of the 1980s to 1,760 in the year he started. Smiley’s mandate, as one member of the search committee put it, was to stop the bleeding. Or, in the words of a board member, his job was to bring the school first in to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and then in to the 21<sup>st</sup>.

There follows here the perspectives of four composite “stakeholders” about the years since Smiley’s appointment. These are not verbatim transcripts. They are synthesized accounts drawn from interviews conducted in the fall of 2012 with more than 40 members of the Associated school community.



## The parent: Janet Kaye (Posluns)

I have to tell you, most of our friends couldn't understand why we were signing up our kids for Associated. A crowd of us had gone to the school during 60s and 70s. Like almost everyone else I know who grew up and went to school in Toronto, I stayed in the city after I got married. My husband, by the way, who I met in a program on Israel, went to day school in Montreal.

The thing is, hardly any of my former classmates ever considered going back to the school. As children, we got a pretty solid education; you know, great Hebrew, strong literacy. It was all very meat and potatoes. But if you had any kind of learning problem, they pretty much pushed you out of the door. So, although nearly all of our friends put their kids in to day school, they chose schools that didn't even exist when we were younger.

Personally, I quite like a traditional kind of education. You know what you're getting. But the school was stuck in a time warp. I mean some of our old teachers and principals were still on the job. On my first prospective parent visit, I even found some of the same old Hebrew grammar posters still hanging on the wall. In the same place! That's what put off a lot of people. They weren't going to put their kids in a class with the same teacher who shouted at them 30 years ago.

But then it turns out that we came up trumps, you know, we hit the jackpot, what with the changes we've seen in the last ten years.

To tell you the truth, I don't think we even noticed any change in Dr. Smiley's first year, although of course it was exciting that an old schoolmate was coming back to head the school. I suppose the first sign of change was, when, towards the end of that year, he appointed Eric — Mr. Golombek — to be Principal at Posluns, the branch where our kids went. Obviously, our kids went to Posluns because it's round the corner, but everyone knew that ever since they had opened the Kamin branch, up north, we were the poor relations. The branches may have been part of the same school, but only in name. Maybe that's why they put Eric in here. It needed more work.

The first thing Eric did was run these breakfast meetings with small groups of parents. Everyone got a chance to come.

Until then, the only time parents got invited in was when they advised you to pull your kid. He asked us what we wanted from the school; what did we think needed changing? He was very respectful of his staff — after all, he'd been at the school too — but it was clear that he saw the need for change. Most people did.

I realize that it's not all about one person, but it was amazing what changes we saw even in Eric's second year; pretty much all of the things we asked for. They started this program — *Ra'anana* — it was basically a way of bringing in more gym, art and music. Before then, that stuff hardly ever happened. The art program was something like the teacher letting you take out your crayons on Friday if you'd behaved all week.

Anyway, so they recruited this great team of specialists who ran these programs for a few hours a week in each grade. And, during the hours that the program was running, there was time for the teachers to work and plan together. They still do it. They even use some of the time for different grades to come together for *tefillah*.

Actually, that's something else that also changed: *tefillah*. It used to be excruciating. I mean, kids were graded for their *davening*. It was so rote-based. Of course, they still *daven* every day — I think that's something that's still important to most parents — but Eric started leading *tefillah* twice a week. They introduced some variety, and much more singing. They even started to study the prayers. The kids came back saying that they were actually enjoying it.

This certainly hasn't been an overnight thing, but when I compare the experience of my oldest with my youngest, it's hard to believe. Sure, it's absolutely the school I went to as a child, but it's completely different. They still take *Ivrit B'Ivrit* seriously. They still work the kids hard. They still do Talmud in the middle school. You have to take more than a minimum of French the whole way through. But it has become fun to go to school. They now have lunchtime programs and much more extracurricular stuff. There's student council, newspaper, chess club, a ton of sports.

I suppose none of these things is a big deal. They probably happen in most of the other day schools. They ought to. But for us to get to this point — especially with all of the hoo-ha about being a 100-year-old institution — it required a lot of

people to change the way they do things, or at least to realize that it was time to move on. That's certainly what happened with the principals.

I'm actually amazed that some of the old-time teachers really did start to change. I don't know how that happened, especially with the real veterans. You'd have to ask someone else about that. My sense, from talking to a few of them, is that they actually appreciated being treated like professionals who were expected to work hard but were given opportunities to really grow. Anyway, that's my take.

### The student: Jeremy Joseph (Kamin and Hurwich)

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My name is Jeremy Joseph. I'm in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. I'm, like, the youngest child of four. I've got three sisters. My oldest sister is actually 15 years older than me. They all went to Associated too. So did my dad, by the way. His father was school president or something like that.

So, we've kind of been an Associated family for a long time. Except for one year when my oldest sister started. My parents put her in another Jewish school that had recently opened where everyone was religious. Quite a few Associated families switched over. They started the school. It was a bit controversial. But my sister only stayed for a year. I think my parents felt that everyone there was too similar.

That's one of the really cool things about our school. How different the kids are. There are a couple of us who are, like, *shomrei Shabbat*. You know, we go to shul every week. We keep kosher. All that stuff. In the summer, there are a few of us who go to Camp Ramah. But there are other kids who barely keep anything. They certainly don't keep kosher at home. (Actually, I have to be careful about that when I go to people's houses.) There are also the kids with Israeli parents, and there's the Russians too. They may not be my closest friends, but we really get along. We play hockey together — the Russians are usually the best, of course — and we sometimes hang out on Sunday afternoons.

There's one thing you should know, actually. People don't talk about it much. But I know from my closest friends that there are some of us who come from quite wealthy families; we have pretty big homes, for example. Like, my family goes to

Israel quite a lot. And then there are a few kids whose parents aren't so well off. You know, they live in some of those small apartments round the corner from Bathurst and Finch. But, I really think that stuff doesn't make a difference. My best friend, Shawn, his parents aren't so wealthy. You should see his mom's car. It's hilarious. Anyway, Dr. Dzaldov, our middle school principal, calls it "*klal yisrael*." We're all Jews, and we all look out for each other.

So, if you want to know what's changed, there's one thing that happened a few years ago, like, five or six years ago. When they closed *Shearim*, the Jewish school for kids with special needs, our school opened up extra classes to take those kids in. I think we were the only school that did. Anyway, those kids used to be in separate classes most of the time. Now that we're in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, they're in with everyone else, and the teacher seems to cope pretty well. We do a lot of project work together. I find that pretty much everyone has a talent they can use when they're working together. I don't know how that happens, but it's amazing.

It's interesting. I have an older cousin. He was in the school too. He's about the same age as my sister. He had some learning issue — I don't know what it's called. They basically told him that he'd be better off in public school. I don't think they'd do that now.

The biggest change for me has been the technology. It might be the same in other schools, but in the last few years, since I started the middle school, we've been doing stuff that I'm pretty sure my older sisters never did. We've got smart boards in every room. Some of the teachers do really cool stuff with them, in Mishnah, Chumash and Hebrew. Not just in science and math. In every subject we get a lot of our assignments online, and we can even be graded online. Each teacher has their own website. We take turns to upload project photos. It's pretty legit. You should see.

There's this thing we have in Chumash. They call it Standards and Benchmarks. We started using it a few years ago. It basically means that we know what we're supposed to be achieving. Like, what level we're at, and what we need to do to get to the next level. Like, where we need to get to. It means that whatever we're studying is connected to some big idea or big question. It's much more interesting. We've also got stuff like

that, you know, rubrics and standards, in most subjects. It's kind of everywhere.

There's one more thing that's changed. We're doing much more outside the classroom. I know that when my sisters were in the middle school, they never cancelled lessons for special programs. Except on *Yom Hasboah*. Now, we do a pile of programs, with the whole grade together. There's serious stuff like anti-bullying things, but there are also fun things as well, to do with Israel, or some of the *chagim*. Occasionally, it even feels a bit like camp, especially when Mr. Cohen, our Judaics principal, is involved. It's certainly like that in the lunchtime and afterschool clubs like robotics and cooking, or book club.

What hasn't changed: That's easy to answer, at least in the middle school. *Tefillah!* We still do it every day. For 45 minutes. That can be a bit of a drag. I mean, it's not that anyone does anything crazy, but a lot of the kids are dying to be out of there. Or they just fall asleep. It's very funny when that happens. Anyway, you should tell Dr. Smiley. They still need to work on that.

So, next year, I'm going on to CHAT, the Jewish Community high school. Almost everyone is, although it's a bit annoying that some of us will be going to the south branch — Wilmington — and some will be going to CHAR — the north branch. That's a shame because half of us only just came together in the middle school from the different branches of Associated. For me, it's a pretty easy decision. I know from my sisters that Associated kids always do well there. They're always in the top streams for the Jewish things, and for a lot of other things too. I suppose that means that they must be doing quite a good job here. Cool, right?

### The teacher: Sarit Shohami (Kamin)

You could say that I've been here rather a long time. This year is my 31<sup>st</sup> year teaching in the school. Rabbi Sofer gave me a half-time position teaching in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade a few months after I moved here from Israel with my husband. I met my husband when he came to work on the *kibbutz* where I was raised and where I was teaching in the school. So, I'm something of a survivor. The *yeladim* think I'm a dinosaur.

You know what they say, "if you can't take the heat..." Most of

my colleagues have moved on during the last few years. They found it hard to change the way they worked; you know, not being able to close the classroom door and do their own thing. I myself feel energized. It has been like a new lease of life, especially since my grandson started in the *Bet Haya'eled*. You see, they don't have mandatory retirement in Ontario. With pay at \$80,000 a year, I could probably go on forever. While I'm enjoying the work, I might as well keep running.

You want to know what's changed since Dr. Smiley came. I would say that at our branch the question really ought to be what changed since they appointed Kathy Freidman as principal. That's when the Red Sea parted. That was about three years after Dr. Smiley came in. She's turned this place upside down, although they say that what we do here is now much more similar to what they do down at Posluns. We're singing from the same songsheet at both branches. That's why you don't hear any more about families wanting to switch.

There was one thing though. It was a sign of things to come, right after Dr. Smiley started. He sent out this memo to all of us saying that there was to be no more yelling at children for whatever reason. Some of my colleagues thought that was a bit of a *chutzpah*. It created a bit of a storm for a few weeks. But that's really been his *sismah*, his slogan, you know: respect the kids. If, for example, a child says that he wants to go to the washroom, that's not a sin. Let him go.

You can see why he brought in Kathy. For her too, it's all about the kids. She believes in seeing how far we can take them; giving them a voice; opening their eyes to the world. Making the learning fun, and making us accountable. As I said before, for some people that was a bit uncomfortable. The idea of sharing your lesson plans with colleagues every week and having other people suggest how you might teach. We used to be kings and queens in our own classrooms. Now we're much more of a family.

For me, the biggest difference today is that we, the teachers, are planning together, we're learning together; Jewish and general studies. Before Dr. Smiley came, general studies weren't even allowed to touch anything Jewish. I'm serious. You couldn't even prepare Rosh Hashanah cards in general studies. Now I'm learning from my colleagues, whatever subject they teach. And most of the people I'm learning from are half my age.

You wouldn't believe how much time we spend on planning. We're all members of PLCs — professional learning communities. Some of us are members of more than one. There's even a PLC for people who are leading PLCs.

You're probably wondering where we find the time for all of this planning. That's what so interesting. They actually found a lot of the time during the school day. That's been Kathy's gift to us. They started this specialist program — in Kamin we call it *Keter*; at Posluns, they call it *Rá'anan*. It means that we, the regular classroom teachers, now have time to meet once a week. Usually, we hold that meeting with Kathy or with an assistant principal. That's an incredible time. We look at students' work. We plan curriculum. We review our standards. We've been running some action research to look at how kids learn. I have to tell you that lit a fire for many of us. We've gotten excited about teaching and learning. You'd be surprised now how many of us are now meeting before and after school as well. We see how valuable this time is.

It's hard to believe but I started to read educational research on my own time. My husband thinks I've joined the cult of Kathy. But it's not just about her.

We have another person, Dafna Ross, she's Director of Teaching and Learning across the branches. She's always creating these great opportunities for us to develop our skills. Because we're now working on aligning all of our teaching goals in Jewish and general studies with the provincial learning goals and success criteria, we've used some of our professional development days to go visit some of the top public schools in the region. Those have been incredible experiences. Talk about coming out of the ark. I can now quote chapter and verse from the provincial guidelines: learning goals; success criteria; descriptive feedback; self and peer assessment; individual goal setting. And I teach Hebrew! I'd be surprised if that happens in many other schools.

Another thing that Dafna took up a level was the work she did with us on IEPs, students' individualized educational plans. We've got so many of those students nowadays, and we've really learnt how to use the plans and how to develop them with specialist faculty. As I said, it's ultimately about the kids.

While I think about it, let me tell you one more thing about

the kids. I actually believe that they have a better time at school now. We do so many of these great things that take them out of the classroom or that connect their parents to the things we most believe. As Kathy never stops telling us, the kids **can** make a difference. But don't talk to them about changing the world when they're nine years old; it's about what can you do here in our school, in our community, today. So, we have this garden at the back of the school where we grow crops that we take to the Jewish community food bank. There's another thing. We officially adopted the lake down the street, Centre Street Pond. We're taking care of Canada, and we learn how, as Jews, we have an obligation to do so. We grow herbs at the front of the school. Environmentally, it's a beautiful thing. But the herbs are also there so that families can take some home for Shabbat.

That's our approach with the families. We don't tell them what to do at home. We just enable them to have beautiful Jewish experiences. Like our *Havdalah* on ice, when the whole school is on skates with the lights out. Even my husband comes to that one. Or our *Sukkot* program. We don't tell them to build a *sukkah*. We use the *arba'ah minim* to open up big questions about the environment. It's warm and it's inviting. If there's *klal yisrael* anywhere in the city of Toronto, it's sitting in our school. That's what we're building every day.

I know, you probably think I'm on drugs. But it is an incredible thing how morale has changed in the school. We're working harder than ever. You should only know how many ways I have to be in contact with parents now with all of the technology we have available. That takes hours each week. But we're feeling good about ourselves. Especially the Judaic studies teachers. We're as serious about teaching and learning as everybody else in the building. If not more so. That's why I feel like a new teacher. All I can say is *ad me'ah ve'esrim*.

## The board member: Tommy Simons

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What's changed? I'll tell you, having been on and off the board for the last 15 years. Bottom line: We turned this thing around. We were bleeding. I don't think we would have ever died. We would probably have ended up as a much smaller school; much smaller. But today, in the south, we're bursting at the seams. That's why we opened a new kindergarten. In

the north, we have a challenge. We stopped the hemorrhaging. But we're working with a community up there that's house poor, and — to be frank — for the first time in many years, the message they're hearing from the Jewish community is that you can still get an optimal Jewish education, even if you don't go to day school. That was never the way in Toronto. But times have changed. At the end of the 1990s we got squeezed when the community made it possible for too many schools to open, and now we're being hit 15 years later by a new normal in the community that says it's possible to manage without day schools. To be holding enrollment steady at over 1700 kids in a context like this is nothing short of heroic.

I love the image that Smiley uses of how even the biggest ocean liner depends on a tiny mechanism to turn it around. That's us. We're one hefty institution, but we've made something happen, not overnight, rather piece by piece, by making changes in key places, and by building on them year by year.

What I'm most proud of is that we never once diluted the program. As you're probably aware, others have got burnt going down that route: toning down the Jewish, if you see what I mean. For us, it was all about how we delivered the program. Remaining faithful to who we are, and moving to the cutting edge.

It's funny. When Smiley was appointed, a few people wondered what would happen to our Hebrew program if the Director of Education wasn't a native Hebrew speaker. He was an alum, but not an Israeli. But I think you'll find if you go in to any of our classrooms that we're just as serious today about *I'vrit B'Ivrit* as we always were. That hasn't changed. How we teach Hebrew has, thank God! Now, our Hebrew teachers know how to use the latest technology to achieve the same if not superior outcomes. It's all about packaging. The product hasn't changed.

I actually think that for the first time in a long time, as much because of the economy as because of anything else, our main competition is not the other Jewish day schools, it's the public schools. And people are realizing that the public schools in Ontario are among the best in the world. Now, we have to be as good as them. That's why we're trying so hard to learn from them. There's no shame in that.

The thing about Mark is that he's reminded us of who we are; what we stand for. Maybe that was a special benefit of him

having been an alum himself. I'm sure you've heard people talk about *klal yisrael* here. It's true, that truly was a core value of ours when we were the only game in town. But we lost sight of that for a while, and became a bit elitist. It made the school much easier to run, and it did wonders for our standards. Our graduates always went in to the best classes at CHAT. But our elitism probably drove people away, if that makes sense. More and more parents wanted something that wasn't just a traditional education; not just content. They wanted best practice as well as strong content. Our practice fell behind the times.

Today, I think we are again genuinely open to anybody and everybody in the community, whatever they can afford, and whatever their ability. That's why more than 40% of our families are on subsidies. Among our competitors, it's probably less than 20%. How can we afford it? Well, the one thing we changed was by saying that we won't open a new class if we exceed the class-size limit by one. Instead, for the first time in a long time we're running a wait list, and we're doing it fairly. We'll open a new class as soon as there are eight kids waiting for admission — whether or not they can pay full fee. That's how it starts to become economical.

Actually, let me put that differently. It will never be economical. But it is manageable. What we earn from fees leaves us with a large deficit. About 75% of the deficit is covered by community subsidies of one sort or another, and then we have to go raise the rest. Every year! That's the burden of our mission. If we ran a balanced budget, we would be a much smaller school.

Between you and me, I believe that the community doesn't properly appreciate that about us. Don't get me wrong, we really appreciate their support, but I don't think we're just another school. We play a different role. We are the community's school, even if many in the community don't realize that.

We've also reclaimed the mantle of serving the community in our approach to special needs. We're not embarrassed of the term any more. It's integral to our child-centered and differentiated practice. We certainly couldn't have taken that on board in Smiley's first year, but once he'd established a culture of teacher-learning — once he'd warmed up the place, as he puts it — then extending the range of children in the classrooms became less challenging. In a way, we're saying that everyone is a special kind of learner; the teachers too.

OK. So, of course, there were some delicate moments along the way. I won't pretend that we didn't have to do some top-level surgery. I remember one of the questions we asked Smiley during interviewing was whether he thought he could fire his former teachers. That has not been an easy thing. But I think our approach has been right. There was no grand clear out. We didn't clear the decks overnight. Instead, by raising expectations, the folks who couldn't keep pace figured out for themselves that it was time to move on. That's why we had a special line under the budget for "restructuring." It was a way of helping people reach the right decision. The only time we really got pushback was when we asked some of the longstanding campus principals to leave. That was not easy, but I think that was a key to getting this show on the road again. That's where Smiley needed thick skin. His peers and colleagues outside the school saw him as breaking rank with the shop-floor. How could he get rid of his peers? Maybe he touched a raw nerve with that. I don't know.

By comparison, freshening up the front-line faculty was less difficult. As those new, and younger, campus principals increased the pace, and increased expectations, their staff worked out for themselves whether or not this was still a suitable place for them. Mind you, it wasn't half difficult when the principals were so much younger than many of the people they were managing. But, bottom line, how can you argue when the principals have PhDs in education, they work damned hard, and they're members of the community? They're leading by example.

What's been interesting about all of these changes for some of us volunteers is how our own roles have changed. In the past, some of us found ourselves deeply involved in the day-to-day aspects of the school. The folks on the *Vaad HaChinuch* (the Board's education subcommittee), for example, were being called on by teachers to get involved in disputes. There was one time when they had to design a survey that really should have been run by the professionals about what was going on in the middle school. They were kind of sucked in to a vacuum. Adjudicating and pacifying. You know, over questions about why there were such differences between the branches, or why the classes were being organized as they were. It certainly wasn't healthy. Today, I'm wondering, what is the long term role of the *Vaad*? I'm not even sure how much they have to do with their time other than approve the school calendar.

I really feel that we've come a long way in a fairly short time. We've made a venerable institution relevant again without changing who we are, if that doesn't sound paradoxical.

It's funny, about five years ago, we adopted a new marketing slogan for the school, "Associated, a great school!" At the time, it was essentially aspirational. We could have been sued on the grounds of misrepresentation. Today, I feel that the statement's for real. Our task now is to make sure that people see evidence of that greatness. If we can get that message across, and stay on our toes, there's no reason we shouldn't be here for another 100 years.



## Questions for Further Thought:

1. Which common themes surface in how all four interviewees talk about what has changed and what has stayed the same in the school?
2. What do you make of the fact that the different narrators each point to different people as having been critical for them?
3. Are there any insights into these changes that only one interviewee sees that are not noticed by the others? How do the narrators' understandings of what has happened differ because of their different perspectives?
4. Tommy Simons (the board member) references the image of a tiny mechanism that turns around an ocean liner. What do you see as having been the critical mechanisms that have turned around the school?
5. The main change agent does not offer his version of events. If the Head of School had told his story, what do you think he would point to as having been critical in enabling change to occur?
6. How do you see changes in general educational norms having an impact on choices made at the school?
7. The longevity and size of Associated make it a most unusual Jewish day school. Do you think that the school's size and its age have been advantages or disadvantages in this period?
8. Despite the school's unusual size and longevity, what do you see as implications of relevance to all schools seeking to sustain a commitment to Jewish religious purposefulness, Hebrew literacy and Jewish peoplehood?
9. Try to characterize the school's approach to Judaism and Jewish education.
10. A lot of this case is about perception, and how people's perceptions of the school change over time. What do you think families look for in a school? What do you think they were looking for in this school?