

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

A Project of the AVI CHAI Foundation

The Grand Conversation

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The atmosphere in SAR High School was a mixture of excitement and anxiety. The school year had begun less than six weeks earlier, but the way the Jewish holidays fell out this year, this was to be the start of only the second full week of school and the first in over a month. The work of school would now begin in earnest.

Four young men and women — three who had come from SAR Academy's 8th grade and lived in the neighborhood, one who had attended a public middle school and commuted from Manhattan — met us during lunch for about 40 minutes in a multipurpose classroom on the freshman floor of the six-story building.

Asked to tell us about the school's mission — what SAR terms “the Grand Conversation” — and what's distinctive about it, the students shared with us how they understood it:

“The English teacher refers to Gemara, the Tanakh teacher refers to English.”

“Grand conversation is useful for the world.”

“This school has a philosophy.”

“It's about viewing Jewish studies into secular studies.”

“At the orientation, we did an activity. It's about applying general studies to Jewish studies and vice versa.”

“We learn to integrate Jewish values into everything.”

“Here we can grow as an individual.”

“Here we are encouraged to get a sense of our Jewish self.”

With less than 20 days of school under their belts, four 9th graders were able to express SAR's mission in clear terms, cite examples and articulate their appreciation of it. How did this come about?

Lest we attribute this mission-awareness to an intensive orientation and induction, our meeting with four 10th graders that same day to talk about “the Grand Conversation” was consistent with what we heard from the 9th graders, with the appropriate uptick in sophistication, nuance and critical stance:

“The Grand Conversation is about engaging the world from a Jewish perspective even when doing something not Jewish.”

“[Their goal is to] preserve a Modern Orthodox outlook in a secular world. In other schools students will come to

reject Orthodoxy. At SAR we learn how to become comfortable with who you are as Jew.”

“Freshmen year ‘the Grand Conversation’ appeared a lot. Now [in 10th grade] it's how you live your life and is brought up more randomly.”

“This is a mission-driven school — teachers feel they are doing good for the world.”

“The Grand Conversation makes everyone from all backgrounds feel wanted.”

“It's about learning to think consciously about your choices.”

“It's a nice idea, but still a lot of people are out of touch and don't know how to balance.”

We thought we might have spent two lunch periods with the most articulate students in their grades, but throughout our three days at the school, these insights and explanations of “the Grand Conversation” were heard on the lips of students, faculty, parents and board members. This notion — SAR's signature understanding of what it meant to be Jewish in contemporary America — was clearly shot through virtually every aspect of the school with relentless consistency. How does SAR do it?

A Founding Head's Vision

According to the school's website, SAR High School is “the brainchild of Rabbi Tully Harcsztark,” a thoughtful and erudite administrator who had been in SAR (Salanter-Akiva of Riverdale) Academy (K–8) for several years as teacher and then administrator, and was then tapped about ten years ago to launch and run a Modern Orthodox high school division for the school. Studying various models of successful Jewish and other private and public high schools over a two-year preparatory period, Rabbi Harcsztark articulated a unique, student-centered vision of high school education and then assembled a team of like-minded educators to implement it. According to the website:

SAR High School is a community of learners dedicated to:

- Recognizing the unique needs and potential of each individual
- Challenging each learner to move beyond his or her comfortable limits

- Probing and engaging the world with humility and openness to God's creations
- Immersing themselves in a culture of learning and service as participants in the "Grand Conversation" between Torah and the world
- Shaping an environment where *mitzvot* inspire respect, obligation and aspiration¹

Two things about the mission statement are noteworthy regarding its Jewish mission. First, it does not refer to "Jewish studies" and "general studies" as separate categories; indeed, the whole point of the mission seems to be their integration, placing them into a "conversation" rather than setting up some defined creedal formulation or clear set of outcomes and resolutions. In contrast to Jewish day schools that strive for excellence in both parts of its academic program, SAR's focus is literally "on the hyphen,"² eschewing easy or simplistic bifurcations of the desire to live in contemporary America as committed Modern Orthodox Jews.

With its goal of addressing the tension and conflict head on and admitting of no single solution to it, it is not surprising to see that SAR includes in its mission the **characteristics** of the learning community that can support "The Grand Conversation" — acknowledging each person's individuality, pushing students beyond their comfort zones and assuming a posture of humility and openness to the world around us. **This** is SAR's core mission — developing a stance, a posture towards living a Modern Orthodox life as opposed to preaching a checklist of ideas and practices. Indeed, we found that for

¹ <http://www.saracademy.org/page.cfm?p=410>. The last bullet about *mitzvot* and observance was not part of the school's original mission statement — the focus was almost exclusively on "the Grand Conversation" between "Torah and the world." Of course, for there to be a conversation, there needs to be two equal sides, and so Rabbi Hartzstark felt that a strong Judaic component was "already there." Nevertheless, about five years ago when the school leadership began to assess its Judaics program and the choices students were making, it felt an emphasis or highlighting of the school's ideological commitment to a life of *mitzvot* was called for. The professional leadership recommended adding a clarifying bullet to the mission statement as the most efficient and public way of doing this, and the lay leadership went along without any real debate or challenge (evidence of the perception that this move was merely rendering explicit what was already implicit in SAR's mission).

² This is a reference to a famous anecdote related to Yosef Burg, a Religious Zionist (*dati le'umi*) politician in the early days of the State of Israel. When asked by a reporter where he was more comfortable — on the *dati* or on the *leumi* side of his identity, he responded, "on the hyphen."

some students, the term "The Grand Conversation" became shorthand for these other cultural aspects of SAR rather than for the actual integration of Judaics and general studies.

With its emphasis on creating a particular kind of learning community, the school can then go on and enumerate its goals, all framed within its culture of conversation, reflection and the acknowledgement of multiple legitimate views:

This mission commits us to:

יראת שמים

Students will deepen their love for and commitment to Torah, *mitzvot* and our rich heritage of learning. Our graduates will continuously develop their relationship with God, opening themselves to the mystery and wonder of the world.

תורה וחכמה

Students will be devoted to exploring the language, practice and outlook of the two cultures within which they live. Our graduates will dedicate time in their day for Torah study and intellectual inquiry. They will shape Jewish life, create Jewish culture and contribute to the broader society.

מדינת ישראל

The creation of the State of Israel is one of the seminal events in Jewish history. Recognizing the significance of the State and its national institutions, we seek to instill in our students an attachment to the State of Israel and its people as well as a sense of responsibility for their welfare.

אהבת הזולת

Students will cultivate a caring and compassionate disposition and respond to the needs of their school, family, and community. They will develop the skills to work with others toward common goals. Our graduates will act in a spirit of courage and selflessness for social justice and the betterment of Israel.

צלם אלוקים

Students will recognize their unique strengths and talents and value the contributions of others. They will demonstrate courage of thought and action. Our graduates will act with honesty and integrity, being true to themselves as individuals.³

To be sure, "Rabbi Hartzstark's brainchild" is deeply embedded in the social context of the Modern Orthodox

³ <http://www.saracademy.org/page.cfm?p=410>

communities of New York and New Jersey. SAR is located in Riverdale, a heavily Jewish neighborhood that includes several Modern Orthodox and Conservative synagogues with a highly educated membership. It is also easily accessible from other Modern Orthodox enclaves in Manhattan, White Plains/Westchester in New York, and Bergen County in northern New Jersey. All these communities have several and somewhat diverse Modern Orthodox synagogues — and elementary schools — many of whose families would find SAR’s mission consistent with their lives and outlooks as observant Jews fully engaged in the secular world as highly educated professionals and businesspeople. (The significant majority of SAR’s students have at least one parent who attended day school.) This demographic certainly contributes to SAR’s rapid growth; the school opened with 68 students in 2003 and now boasts over 500 students in four grades, with the largest freshmen class ever this year (151). However, the school’s success is more likely attributable to the fact that SAR’s mission resonates powerfully with the priorities of many families and leaders in these communities that seek to integrate their Jewish life and their involvement in the wider society.

Understandably, the Modern Orthodox families in these neighborhoods — and especially Riverdale, SAR’s home — fall on all points on the spectrum of religious observance. Some are deeply committed ritually and intellectually, while others are driven not by lack of ideological awareness or allegiance but by their being socially most comfortable in Orthodox circles, for whatever reason. Because SAR is about “the Grand Conversation,” rather than laying out a specific set of practices and views that all students are expected to follow, the school can be a rather “big tent” for Modern Orthodox and more observant Conservative Jewish families. In fact, the school deliberately seeks to reflect the diversity of these communities in its student body, a point explicitly made to us by both Rabbi Hartzstark and the Dean of Admissions — a very crucial factor in a day school with a wait list.

The alignment of families with the school’s mission is key to understanding the incredible satisfaction with, and even love of, SAR that we heard from parents, board members and alumni. In our closing conversation with him, Rabbi Hartzstark shared how he sits down with inquiring families and explains that the

school’s approach is to teach the centrality of *mitzvah* observance and commitment to *halakhab* along with how one can integrate Torah and the world, but that it also acknowledges that there are families — and students — who think and practice differently, and that the school’s job is to figure out how to integrate those families into the SAR community. The school does not stifle or bury that reality, and even encourages teenagers to share their thoughts or questions even if they are critical or questioning. That is why the leaders find it so important to have the school reflect the diverse complexion of the communities the students currently inhabit and from which they will likely choose to affiliate when they grow up — a diversity of communities and practice whose heterogeneity Rabbi Hartzstark claims few Modern Orthodox leaders acknowledge. In preparation for life after high school, SAR ceaselessly promotes reflectiveness and intentionality among its students, especially with respect to Jewish living — better that they should encounter the diversity of acceptable Orthodox options in a guided environment of thoughtful choice than to assume a single version is the ideal, and anything else is a compromise.

In sum, it is not only the **fact** of this diversity of Modern Orthodox practice and commitment but SAR’s open embrace of it — guided by sensitive faculty and staff — that presents the school with its greatest challenge. How does SAR instill in its students and wider school community the habits of thought, the dispositions, attitudes and skills to conduct “the Grand Conversation”? In our visit, we saw evidence of three ways SAR goes about implementing its Jewish mission: faculty, academic program, and building relationships between students and adults.

Faculty

Without doubt, inducting students into SAR’s mission first and foremost requires careful and judicious hiring of faculty and staff. Most of the people we met or observed in the building lived a Modern Orthodox life (again, across the spectrum), or understood enough about it to seize the many teachable moments that model the Grand Conversation during the course of a dual-curriculum school year. Recently hired faculty — Judaics and general studies — whom we met were real exemplars of the Grand Conversation: a Talmud and Tanakh teacher felt the notion of the “Grand Conversation”

captured well his lifelong outlook on Judaism, and an English teacher was drawn from another high school to teach at SAR precisely because as a Modern Orthodox person, he wanted more opportunities to engage in this integration and not be pigeon-holed as a “general studies teacher.” All the new recruits appreciated the school’s general open-mindedness and non-complacency, though several felt that the Grand Conversation could be more pervasive and planned, and the genuine tensions between Judaism and secular culture and society more openly acknowledged and examined.

Students and families acknowledge and value that the building contains so many role models of the school’s mission. One 10th grader and several 11th graders noted this fact in our conversations; some of the latter (boys and girls) excitedly told us about a three-day retreat held at their Talmud teacher’s house for Shavuot and the incredible all-night learning program they shared (he is also a synagogue rabbi). For years, the school has sought to keep its Beit Midrash active and vibrant throughout the day with a “fellows” program that includes American, and at times Israeli, young men and women — from Yeshiva University, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah (now housed in Riverdale), and Bnei Akiva — post-*bnot-sherut* (National Service) women from Israel, or Torah Mitzion (Israeli post-army men who spend a year in a community). This year, there is even an SAR alumna who is taking time off between college and dental school to study in the school’s fellows’ program. The school clearly puts a premium on having teenagers see young Jewish adults — many only slightly older than themselves, within a teenager’s sights, as it were — studying Torah without it being “their job.” Similarly, in our first visit to the school, SAR’s first three-week Beit Midrash learning program for alumni was winding down. A contemporary topic was chosen — homosexuality — and SAR alumni who had finished with the academic year in college yet were waiting for their summer plans to begin studied classical and more contemporary sources on the subject. (They also had a private, no-adults-allowed and presumably no-holds-barred session with SAR juniors and seniors to talk about the realities of college.) Being in New York (and specifically, Riverdale) certainly helps bring these faculty and paraprofessionals to the school: many young teachers and rabbis of this profile from Yeshiva University or Yeshivat Chovevei Torah are available for faculty positions, even if

only for a few years, or to be one-year fellows who assist in the classrooms and learn with students in smaller groups. As one walks through the building, one cannot help but notice the youthfulness of teachers, many appearing (and acting) like “older siblings” (one Judaics teacher brought his three-week old baby into the school and students stood over her admiring her) or cool adults to whom students could relate relatively easily (more on this below).

While the new teachers, even in general studies, seemed to us to be entirely “mission-appropriate” in their embodiment of “the Grand Conversation,” the general studies principal (himself a Modern Orthodox non-rabbinic PhD) insisted that faculty members in secular subjects are chosen **not** based on religious outlook, but on their talent as teachers. He, along with department chairs, asserted that the best teachers are hired, but they are then put through a tremendous amount of induction, learning that “mission drives the school.” Like the 9th graders, new faculty goes through a mission exercise at their orientation. It is expected that **all** teachers will meet regularly, both departmentally and at grade level, and new teachers will have additional meetings to ensure they understand and implement the school’s rubric of standards, which include cultivation of critical thinking skills. (Remarkably, the standards do not themselves include the “Grand Conversation” in any explicit way.) We consistently heard about teachers sharing with one another — teachers inviting art instructors into their classes for a project, general studies teachers asking Judaics teachers to help them integrate Judaics material into a lesson or unit, and even informal observations of other teachers being encouraged. In fact, according to administrators, relatively few “Grand Conversation moments” are curricularly planned; the preference is for such moments to arise organically in the course of planning a lesson or a class discussion. The attitude of many Jewish high schools that the students’ religious development is the purview of the Judaics teachers is explicitly rejected: at open houses, Rabbi Hartzstark states explicitly that all teachers have a say in supporting and cultivating students’ religious outlooks, a view we heard from others in the school as well as parents. For instance, at grade level Shabbatons, all faculty are invited to attend, and one can often find non-Jewish teachers talking about Jewish ritual practice with the students. Thus, faculty absorb from the larger school culture

as much as the new students, evidence of the powerful culture SAR has created within its walls.

It was therefore not surprising that we saw evidence of the “Grand Conversation” in only a handful of the classes we observed: at the classroom level, most of the connections are organic rather than planned, though some courses by their nature address the school’s mission more regularly — A.P. Art is taught by two artists with extensive Jewish background and the projects are frequently Judaics-related; the class in Arabic deals with current events in Israel and the Middle East; and in English, literature is intentionally chosen to expose students to problems of the wider world that they are not likely to encounter in their relatively homogeneous socio-economic status. Judaics classes, too, did not necessarily all exemplify the “Grand Conversation,” whether Talmud, Chumash or Hebrew (though the Chumash class on *Shemot* began with the slogan of the Soviet Jewry movement “Let my people go”). Rather, it seems that the “heavy-lifting” of the school’s mission is done by the more planned elements of the curriculum and school program, which we will deal with next.

Academic Program

As with most Orthodox Jewish high schools, considerable time in the daily schedule is devoted to Judaics courses — *Chumash* and *Navi*, Talmud, and Hebrew. We saw evidence of good teaching, a challenge in the semi-open classrooms that are SAR Academy’s signature architectural feature. All upperclassmen had regular classes in *Machshevet Yisrael* (Jewish thought) that served as one of the primary vehicles for students to grapple with theological issues and to deal with tensions in being Modern Orthodox. According to one teacher, students, and especially alumni, value these classes for how they learned how to have conversations with the world at large — another instance of “the Grand Conversation.” Similarly, the Tikvah Program (funded by the Tikvah Foundation) was introduced this year for select juniors and seniors who study a specially designed curriculum in which they read classics of Western and Jewish thought and discuss them with a Modern Orthodox faculty member with the requisite background.

Informal and experiential avenues of education fill the school, from a daily dvar Torah after *tefillah* (this was recently

curricularized so that students will come to learn many of the laws and meanings behind Jewish prayer — on the day we attended, Rabbi Harczstark briefly noted and explained the Talmud’s reasons for 18 blessings in the *amidah*) to annual grade-level Shabbatons that take place in the school building and an all-school Shabbaton off-site. Faculty and administrators spend immeasurable hours putting these retreats together, attending to content but also to the relationships being forged between students, as well as faculty and students. (We will talk about advisories in the next section.)

But above all, the framework SAR has developed for the most intensive reflection on and modeling of “the Grand Conversation” is the *beit midrash*. Now the school’s very architecture places Judaic learning at the center — the traditional *beit midrash* (study hall) is literally in the center of the building, glassed in so that those within can be seen by all students on that floor or at the stories above it. Judaic teachers regularly bring their classes in to use the *beit midrash* either themselves or more often to study or prepare sources with the young men and women SAR recruits every year to spend the time learning in their building. However, after SAR’s first four to five years, as the school settled into some consistency and regularity, the administrative team felt it needed to fortify the religious side of the school program, a point brought out to them as the more “religious” families in SAR Academy’s 8th grade at the time were choosing not to continue their children to the high school. They also surveyed students and parents and found that the Torah side of “the Grand Conversation,” particularly in terms of personal religious practice, was not as strong as many other elements of the school program. The lead administrators therefore sought a vehicle to address these religious subjects more directly rather than rely on the planned and organic instances of the “Grand Conversation” to have their impact. Twice weekly for grades 9–11 (and once a week for seniors), groups of 10–12 students meet with a faculty member and go over various sources and issues, initially those related to the year’s theme (chosen by the lead staff) and subsequently based on a designed curriculum by grade.⁴ Sources range from Bible and commentaries to medieval writers to contemporary

⁴ Topics include why we make brachot (blessings), sexuality (over three years), technology and Shabbat, and use of language (*lashon hara*, cursing, etc.).

thinkers (Orthodox and non-Orthodox) and even newspaper or journal articles and blogs. Last year, the theme was “*areivut*” (mutual responsibility) and this year, the focus is on *deveikut* (attachment to the divine), a theme greatly appreciated by one freshman who told us, “I really appreciate the reminder to think about God.” Significantly, the theme permeates not just these weekly sessions, but other programming in the school, whether in arts, music, Shabbatons, etc. This year, the administration inaugurated “critical friends groups” that put Judaics and general studies teachers together to work on bringing the year’s theme into their respective classes, a framework that has interdisciplinary collaboration as one of its possible outcomes.

Compared to the middle school experience of most freshmen, the *beit midrash* forum is quite new and refreshing. Another freshman said, “We have really interesting conversations; there are a lot more windows you can open.” When we visited in the late spring — right before finals — it had been decided to have a 10th grade-wide *beit midrash* in which several faculty and administrators came in and spoke to the students about “being Jewish during the summer” — encouraging students to reflect on their religious development when they would be out of school, and a supportive Jewish framework, for an extended period of time. The faculty, who shared interesting experiences of their own youth (not all of whom were fully observant in their teen years), gave interesting examples of how they behaved during their summers. For instance, one Judaics teacher noted that he chose to do five minutes of learning a day rather than setting an overly ambitious goal that he would inevitably not meet and subsequently give up on learning entirely during the summer. Another, who was not religious in his youth, mentioned how he nevertheless chose to wear a *kippah* while at a summer job and how that positively impacted a customer. These brief vignettes engaged a portion of the students, though there was not a lot of time for the 10th graders to discuss or respond at length to what they heard. Nevertheless, the fact that the school felt it important to flag the issue and address it forthrightly — consistent, of course, with SAR’s *modus operandi* of raising the relevant sources, issues and values for students to take into account rather than dictating clear rules or expectations of behavior — no doubt helps the notion of “the Grand Conversation” penetrate into most students’ understanding of their Jewish identities.

The impact of these efforts is hard to gauge. As noted above, the school’s mission and program reflect both the religious balance most parents and families have struck, either intellectually or socially, in their personal lives, and the preferred means — persuasion as opposed to coercion — of imprinting that balance. In light of this reality, SAR’s approach has had only “limited success” with teens in terms of their strengthened religious commitments or observance. One parent told us while she was thrilled that her son played a central leadership role in his college’s Jewish life, she acknowledged that his personal religious practice in terms of daily *tefillah* and Shabbat was not what she had hoped for. In a post-visit conversation, the husband of one of our parent interviewees shared his different perspective of the school — that SAR had a reputation for encouraging students to push themselves in ways typical of college-preparatory high schools — academics (APs, honors) and extracurriculars (Model UN, sports, arts, newspaper, clubs) — but not necessarily religiously. Indeed, the school’s inclusiveness left some parents wondering if SAR was still a “safe environment” for students who come in observant, but who discover that it’s not really “cool” to be *frum* (observant) or all that serious about religion. As one student noted to us, “this is a time of flux for teens. Some kids come here more religious and then become less, but no one totally rejects them.”

This last student’s insight — that one’s religious thinking and levels of practice in high school may have more to do with the phase of the child’s development than the contents of the school program — is likely the keenest. From Rabbi Harczstark on down, the adults in the building acknowledge that to a large degree, a Modern Orthodox viewpoint is still somewhat countercultural, and the school must work with the reality of American teens who are testing limits and “trying on” identities in developmentally appropriate ways. (The incorporation of advisories that address relationships, sense of self, etc. is part of this approach.) The leaders were also very comfortable taking the long view — how their graduates fare in terms of life choices far beyond graduation — rather than exit interviews and surveys. And without doubt, the fondness that so many alumni have for SAR translates into their respect for Orthodoxy, even if they choose right now not to be fully observant. Of course, the teachers and leaders of SAR also use more tried-and-true methods of occasional *yemei iyun* (dedicating entire school days to a particular Judaic topic), *chagigot*, or a

school-wide *siyyum* to involve more students in focusing on elements of their Jewish identity and practice. For instance, right after Shavuot, there was an all-school breakfast/assembly marking the culmination of students' study of all of Tanakh and Mishnah, which also served as a send-off to the Torah Mitzion young men who had been in the school that year. Of course, even with speakers using a microphone and throwing a Powerpoint presentation on a large screen, it is hard to keep 400 students in a gym engaged or focused. Nevertheless, having these events does send a message to students that many absorb, even if not immediately.

Relationships

Finally, a motif that came up regularly in our conversations with Judaics faculty, parents and board members was the importance of student-adult relationships at SAR. We have already noted the youthfulness of many Judaics faculty, staff and administrators in the context of their serving as role models to the students for how to live “the Grand Conversation.” However, an atmosphere of adult accessibility pervades the school: administrative offices are glassed in to reflect both transparency and a sense of invitation to enter whenever one is moved to. As the adults move through the hallways, many brief but meaningful interactions with students take place — almost every one serendipitous, but taken as a whole quite intentional. School activities are designed to maximize the points of contact between students and faculty/administrators (all administrators also teach at least one class a day): small *minyanim* in the morning and afternoon with faculty present to assist; highly interactive Judaics classes with additional fellows coming in occasionally to learn *be-chevruta* with smaller groups of students; electives, Shabbatons, and of course the *beit midrash*. The boundaries around teachers and administrators typical in most schools are simply absent at SAR.

The Judaics teachers fully understood the added responsibility they had; it was part of the job description, and they appreciated the power these relationships had in helping students sort out their Jewish values and priorities. The non-judgmental nature of SAR was paramount in both the students' and their parents' perspectives; they felt faculty accepted them for who they were, struggles and all. Those teachers who lived

in the neighborhood saw students over the weekend and felt comfortable inviting them, as well as commuting students, for Shabbat meals.

Above all, SAR's “advisories” — a structure built in to the school from its inception — are the vehicle through which these close student-adult relationships are developed. Each year, students are assigned to an advisor from among the school's faculty, administration and staff, and they meet regularly, both one-on-one and in small groups, to go over the student's overall well-being, reviewing academic, social or religious concerns that may come up. The school clearly views the student's advisor as the adult with primary responsibility for knowing how a student is faring; on one of the days of our visit, the late afternoon and evening were reserved for families — parents and child — to have a meeting with the advisor and go over the student's progress and flag any issues. This takes the place of the traditional parent-teacher conferences that ‘sub-divide’ the student's school experience and make it hard to see the overall picture of how the student is doing. To be sure, staff is trained extensively for this by professionals, but the benefits reaped are significant, as students feel valued, acknowledged and respected — particularly important in a large school at which the individual student could easily get lost or overlooked. Conceived to help in the process of nurturing students' self-awareness and reflectiveness, advisories serve an essential role in inculcating within students the habits of heart and mind that are needed to live “the Grand Conversation.”

Conclusion

All observers of the American scene agree that our contemporary culture and attitudes about religion are frankly not conducive to traditional religion, and certainly not to Orthodox Judaism with its demanding regimen of laws and particularistic outlook. Some Orthodox groups want day schools to cloister their young, others prefer a type of ‘inoculation’ against the toxins of the wider society. Most, in practice, simply accept the bifurcated life of Orthodoxy on the one hand and secular pursuits on the other, and trust that the positive effects of each will maintain the balance, while hoping the tensions won't be too overwhelming.

SAR takes the interaction — the hyphen — between Torah and the world and places it as the very center of its mission. The relatively young high school has formulated a compelling mission and now pursues it relentlessly: the academic program, the hiring and nurturing of mission-appropriate faculty and the deliberate effort to maximize the chances for interaction between the adults and the students are all oriented to the same goal: to help the teenagers see how to engage in “the

Grand Conversation” and to enable them to intentionally, deliberately embrace the two worlds they will inhabit, unafraid of addressing the tensions head on. It’s a risky venture, and only longitudinal studies will tell us how this approach fares in the real world of adulthood. Of this we can be sure: The leadership of SAR will take those studies, analyze them thoroughly and if necessary re-design their program to achieve their goal of “the Grand Conversation.”

Questions for Further Thought:

1. Have you created programs designed to introduce students to the vision of your school? What did you learn from them? If asked about your school, do students articulate their perspectives on the school in language reminiscent of the vision?
2. Thinking forward, what would you want students or recent alumni to say about the school that would show they understand the school’s unique vision? How would you work backwards from that outcome and create a program that would bring it about?
3. The case presents SAR’s focus as “literally on the hyphen.” Use that image as a lens for reflecting on your own school. Where are you successful? In what areas would you want to make this an ideal to strive for?
4. SAR puts forth a vision for what it means to live Jewishly in the world. Does your school have an explicit or even implicit vision of what it means to live Jewishly in the world? If yes, what evidence do you have for how compelling it is? If no, what can you take from the SAR case about creating such a vision?
5. SAR is a very reflective school. Regarding the “Grand Conversation,” SAR knows it has work to do on translating this vision in a planned way into curriculum. How would you advise SAR to think about and study this issue? What opportunities should SAR capitalize on? Are there potential roadblocks that SAR should anticipate?