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## The Founding of a School: An Oral History of the Abraham Joshua Heschel School

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The Founding of a School:  
An Oral History of the Abraham Joshua Heschel School

By  
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
of Master of Science in Education/Master of Education  
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ABSTRACT

The Abraham Joshua Heschel School was founded in the early 1980's by Peter Geffen and other Jewish professionals and laypersons who were committed to a school that was independent of any synagogue or organization. A school where a wide range of Jewish beliefs and practices along with secular studies could be integrated through intellectual, academic, ethical, artistic, social and emotional realms.

By conducting interviews with 4 of the 8 people who taught or worked at the Heschel school when it opened in 1983, it was possible to collect an oral history that revealed aspects which were significant in founding and beginning a new school. Data analyses consisted of constructing an historical narrative, identifying recurring themes in the stories told and being able to view comparatively which issues were and continue to be important in the school's history and representation.

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## INTRODUCTION

In September 1983, the Abraham Joshua Heschel School opened its' doors for the very first time. The school began in a rented space at the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue and consisted of 28 children, 5 teachers, a director, and a Board of Trustees.

There was a shared commitment by Jewish educators, professionals, business people and dedicated laypersons involved with the school that it offer an innovative approach to learning while weaving together the worlds of Jewish and general studies. The school intended to address itself openly and honestly, to the most important issues confronting American Jewish life. Notes from early grassroots Board meetings indicated that while people were reluctant to define a shared consensus too narrowly, it was fair to suggest that for most, the school represented at least the following:

- a) a high quality program in all academic and religious areas.
- b) a school clearly committed to Jewish knowledge in a non-dogmatic way.
- c) an educationally progressive program, i.e., a place which stimulates children (and adults) to grow rather than pressures them into conforming.
- d) a Jewish school committed to not isolating itself from the larger society unnecessarily and not isolating Jewish knowledge from knowledge in general.
- e) a school where persons are respected, valued, and cared for as individuals.

While the people involved in forming this new school insisted there was a need for such an institution, they were unsure if families would really take the risk of letting their children be part of this unknown experiment in education. The big question for me has always been, how does one actually start a school? Through the use of an oral history I have gathered, I have found out what factors were involved in making the dream of this school a reality.

The main focus of this paper, is to highlight the beginning of the Heschel School. It is a study in how a dream and some ideals becomes a vision and ultimately a reality. I will also touch on where the school is today--it's growth, organization, new dreams and whether it did in fact, become the school it was envisioned to be eleven years ago.

To obtain this oral history I chose to interview four people who were involved with the Heschel School from its beginning in 1983. It should be noted that all of these people are still actively involved with the school.

PETER GEFFEN is the founder of the Heschel School. He was the one who envisioned a Jewish school that could be independent of any particular Jewish movement and therefore be pluralistic in its approach to Judaism as well as egalitarian in the classroom.

Today, in addition to managing the CRB Foundation's Israel Experience Program, Peter also serves as a member of the Heschel School's Administrative team.

RABBI DOV LEREA was originally hired to teach Jewish studies in the First and Second grades. In 1987 he began work on the first written version of a Heshel School curriculum document.

Today, Rabbi Lerea is the Director of Judaic Studies. He supervises these programs in Grades 1-8. In addition, he plans and implements professional development for the staff on issues of curriculum development, holiday programs and parenting programs.

JUDITH TUMIN was the first Early Childhood (PreK/K) teacher at the school. In June of 1993, Judith gave the key note speech as this group of children graduated from the Heschel School. In her ten years at the school, Judith has taught EVERY grade.

Today, Judith is the Director of General Studies for Grades 1-8 and Middle School Director for Grades 6-8. In addition to curriculum development, parent programming and implementing professional development, Judith also counsels the 8th. graders and teaches English Language Arts.

LINDA MESSING began at the school on a part-time basis. She taught General Studies in Grades 1-2 with Rabbi Lerea and Beth Levine. Because she only taught in the morning, Linda was responsible for teaching math, reading, and writing.

Today, Linda is the Math Specialist for Grades 6-8.

Unlike most other Jewish Day Schools, the Heschel School is unique in that it is independent of any synagogue or organization and presents the scope of Jewish beliefs and practices rather than any one view.

The School is named to honor the memory of Dr. (Rabbi) Abraham Joshua Heschel. Dr. Heschel was a prominent scholar, philosopher, and theologian.

He was one of the most beloved and respected voices in American Judaism. As a theologian, Dr. Heschel taught that human beings must bear witness to God through their actions and ethics, as he did with his own life. In the 1960's, he assumed a role of social leadership rarely attained by a religious leader. Heschel was the first major Jewish figure to support Martin Luther King Jr. and his work in the South. (Personnel Policies Manual, 1993-94, p.3)

As a matter of historical fact, it was at the funeral of Dr. King that a key motivational conversation took place between Dr. Heschel and Peter Geffen. Dr. Heschel opposed the Vietnam War and was among the first to urge world Jewry to support the cause of Soviet Jewry.

With Heschel's writings as an inspiration, and his life as an example, the school has developed a curriculum which takes Jewish tradition and history as a starting point from which to grapple with the social and ethical issues of the day. (Personnel Policies Manual, 1993-94, p.3)

The Heschel School could be called "the school with a conscience" because it is a place where students are encouraged to assist in resolving the many conflicts our society faces. The School believes that "an appreciation of multiple perspectives on intellectual, social, and ethical phenomena, events and problems is essential to the ability to think critically and imaginatively" (Personnel Policies Manual, 1993-94, p.4). The stress on "multiple perspectives" for the students is an important one, exemplified by some of the ways the School reaches out to those outside the school. The students, and teachers for that matter, take an active role



in the "repair" of the world, or "tikkun olam" in Hebrew, by their involvement with many charitable and social issues. Food and clothing have been gathered for the homeless, pennies harvested and given to charity and participation in a program entitled, "Bridges and Boundaries: African Americans and American Jews."

"Community" for the Heschel School extends to Israel. From Nursery through the Eighth grade, students learn to speak Hebrew. A long term goal is to be able to have all the students visit Israel at least once during their years at the School. There is a summer program in place that allows teachers to study and write curriculum at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

The Abraham Joshua Heschel School has a proud record of accomplishment since it opened in 1983 with an enrollment of 28 students and 5 teachers.

## METHODOLOGY

Garnering permission to write this oral history proved to be more difficult than I suspected. Initially I was told I had to put a request to write an oral history in writing and submit it to the Board of Directors (see Appendix A). I did so immediately. Feeling confident and prepared, I began the interviews which inform this narrative. To my dismay I was informed by the founder of the School that the Board did in fact have some concerns. It seems that after a lengthy and costly court battle involving ownership of the School, the Board was skeptical about the printed word being used against them. In order to get permission to write this paper I had to agree to never publish or distribute my thesis other than to fulfill my College requirements. In addition, I was asked to submit the final draft for factual review prior to submission to Bank Street. I have submitted a second letter (see Appendix B) and agreed to address all these concerns.

After the interviewing process, I attempted preliminary data analysis of the informants' texts. The narrative of the school history emerged from each of the participant's stories. In the secondary analysis, pertinent themes reoccur through the re-tellings, regarding the school, its organizational roots, its philosophy of education, curriculum and the role of the teacher within it.

Interviewing is one of the key aspects to an oral history. As Patton (1987) and Butchart (1986) have discussed, there are many ways of conducting an interview. In terms of gaining trust and rapport with respondents as well as their perspectives on the school's history, it was important to develop an interview guide for each of the interviews (see Appendix C).

The interviewing guide was kept open-ended in order for respondents to interpret and respond to the questions in a way that opened up the dialogue for the most revealing aspects the respondents felt were significant.

Data analysis consisted of 1) constructing the historical narrative from the interviews and 2) identification of recurring themes in the stories told. It is through the "constant comparative method" (Lofland & Lofland, 1984) that enables one to see which issues were and continue to be important in the school's history and representation. Analysis was furthered by consulting with some of the school's material documentation in the social construction of meaning.

## HISTORY

In 1968, Peter Geffen and (Rabbi) Mickey Shur participated in the funeral of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. They had several responsibilities: to get the mules for the mule train; to pick up Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel at the airport; and accompany Dr. Heschel during the walk through the streets of Atlanta. When the funeral was over, Dr. King's body was placed on the mule train and everybody including Dr. Heschel, Peter and Mickey, walked behind it in a procession to Morehouse College where King was to be buried. At one point during this "heavy day" (Geffen interview, 7/23/93), Peter and Mickey "in their youthful frustration" (ibid) turned to Dr. Heschel and said to him plaintively, "Dr. Heschel, what do we do?" (ibid) They felt the world was collapsing around them. Dr. Heschel thought for a moment, then turned to them and said, "You must teach the children. You must teach them that in Judaism we can remake the world" (Geffen interview, 7/23/93).

Peter Geffen has been working in Jewish education since he was 20 years old. Most of his early work was done with teenagers. At 21, he was Principal of the intensive high school after school supplementary program at the Park Avenue Synagogue. One of the things that became clear to Peter during the next ten years as he watched the alumni go to college/graduate school and come back to New York City, is that they had "few places in which they could plug into anything meaningful in Jewish life" (Geffen interview, 7/23/93).

There are several components that go into the making of a school. For Peter Geffen, there were core values: the search for a way to be able

to integrate the worlds of Jewish and general studies; to include values of social justice and community concern into the curriculum.

These core values were the rationale for establishing the vision of a pluralistic school. The integration piece is critical because it has to do with the picture of what American Jewish life should be all about or what is an "effective way to ensure the possibility that Jewish life will have some viability and attraction" (Geffen interview, 7/23/93).

As time went on, Peter began to think more about these ideas and in 1980, he wrote a few paragraphs on a piece of paper about "a school", no name, just a school. Coincident to that thinking was the practical matter that the Park Avenue Synagogue (where Peter worked) was constructing a new building outside his office. It was a magnificent, big building that was going to be virtually unused until 4 o'clock every day as its use was primarily for after school activities. For Peter it was a "practical, motivating force and not insignificant" (Geffen interview, 7/23/93).

The paper was lying on Peter's desk when a former student, Laura Wolf, came by to say hello. Laura had just graduated at the top of her Harvard class and had a interest in psychology and education. Peter gave her the piece of paper to get her thoughts. (In later years, Laura became a founding Trustee of the school, a member of the Board of Trustees for 10 years and the chairperson of the Education and Religious Policy Committee).

Peter also showed the piece of paper to his first student, Brenda Gruss, for her reaction. Brenda was one of the most extraordinarily bright students he had known. She took the piece of paper to her parents (whom Peter had never met) and showed it to them. About a week later, Peter received a check for \$1,000 from Brenda's parents Emmanuel (Mike) and

Ria Gruss. A short note was enclosed, "Brenda showed us the piece of paper with an idea you had. We assume you'll need some seed money. We hope you can use this and good luck" (Geffen interview, 7/23/93). Once the check came Peter began to take the whole thing a little more seriously. Here was a path he should take.

Between 1980 when the first things were being put on paper and 1981, there was a lot of movement and the two paragraphs became a page and a half. The page and a half was enough for ten people to allow Peter to use their names on a piece of stationery. There was no school, no staff, just a piece of paper and an idea. The critical point about the idea preceding the Board was "so anyone who wanted to come into this thing was buying into the description" (Geffen interview, 7/23/93). When one read the description, it was obvious that there was a bit of latitude. "There's a statement about progressive education that doesn't define it exactly, but it implies that you're not going to end up in a place where you're going to put First graders in rows and desks" (Geffen interview, 7/23/93).

At this point, Peter now has two pages of paper and a plan that the school will be in the new building of the Park Avenue Synagogue. The only problem is that this plan has only been in Peter's mind. The Rabbi of the synagogue, Judah Nadich, (who supported the idea), told Peter that he must meet with the President of the Board, George Shapiro, before announcing it publicly. The night before his meeting, Peter was sitting at his typewriter trying to think of a name for the school and suddenly realized "this school has to named after Dr. Heschel. Who else? It's obvious" (Interview, 7/23/93). He put the name ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL

SCHOOL on the top of his two pages and he was ready for the meeting!

Of the meeting, Peter says:

I hand (George) this piece of paper and he takes a look at it. This is one of the most conservative attorneys in the city of New York, very wealthy, very distinguished. He looks at this piece of paper and says, 'Peter, did you know that I'm an executor of Dr. Heschel's will?' Then this very conservative guy goes on to tell me how when Heschel went to Selma, Alabama he came back and said, 'George, I want you to assemble the richest members of the Park Avenue Synagogue leadership in your home. I want to speak to them. I would like them to help in making contributions to the civil rights movement of Dr. King. George gathered the leadership so that Dr. Heschel could raise the money. As if by an act of the heavens, the choice of the name had been right. (Interview, 7/23/93)

As Dr. Heschel had died in 1972, Rabbi Nadich proceeded to call his widow, Sylvia, to ask her permission to use her husband's name for the school. Sylvia did not know Peter and had no reason to just willingly let Heschel's name be used, but she knew Rabbi Nadich and trusted him. She eventually said that she'd be honored. Peter reminisces;

Once you put that name on these two pages, then it all actually quite easily fits together because Heschel was the epitome of the integrated life. Here's this Eastern European Rabbi of Hassidic descent, baring the mantel of a very significant dynasty. He was in fact named after his great grandfather who was a very distinguished Hassidic Rabbi. Heschel himself was a brilliant student and Rabbi who then went to the university and received a Ph.D. in philosophy. He then wrote a critical book of scholarship on the prophets. He then came to America and

took English as a second language, (as a fourth language really), but truly as a second language with all its limitations and turned it into a creative vehicle for himself in ways that probably very few mother-tongue writers of English have ever done. He was an astounding example of what the Heschel School was to be about in all respects. It also clarified the school's definition. Once you named the school after Heschel, anybody who knew Heschel knew that we were a combination of concerns of social justice, a desire to engage the non-Jewish world, and serious scholarship with a modern approach to Jewish studies. So the name Heschel was a very critical choice. (Interview, 7/23/93)

In 1981, a second check for \$2,000 and a note arrived from Mike Gruss. "We assume that you're still working on this project, we certainly hope so. So here's a small increase to keep going" (Geffen interview, 7/23/93). At this point in the school's development, the original project committee became a Board and Ria Gruss was asked to join it. Ria was delighted to join with the sole stipulation that she would do no fund-raising.

Now it was time to structure the school. Peter selected a group of trusted friends to serve as trustees. Alan Bandler, an attorney, volunteered to file the papers necessary for incorporation as an educational corporation. This resulted in the issuance of a Provisional Charter in order to operate a school. (see Appendix D)

You wouldn't get an Early Childhood license if you didn't have a charter from the state. You have to have a provisional charter to run the technical/business parts of a school. No one comes to check your curriculum, but on the other hand, you can't open a bank account. The charter is in effect your incorporation. You also need it to file for



tax-exempt status with the federal government, which was the next step. (Geffen interview, 7/23/93)

Another former parent of one of Peter's students from Park Avenue Synagogue was a book jacket designer for one of the big publishing companies. She offered to design the first brochure and the logo at no cost. (see Appendix E) The original logo is still being used today.

By 1982, the effort to make the dream a reality was still intact. Rebecca Shahmoon Shanok had taken over the Board of Trustees presidency from John Ruskey. Peter had successfully raised \$60,000 in financial support and a budget had been drawn up. Harriet Bograd was on the phone day and night canvassing prospective parents and persuading people to get involved. A call went out for a headmaster to direct the School and help define the vision

Originally, several outstanding educators from all over the country came to interview for the position. Everyone was very nice, but the general consensus was who would relocate to New York City, leave their job and, start a school that didn't exist yet. Except for Michael Wolff. Michael had been working at a school in Bergen County, New Jersey. "He had an instinct and he was excellent at working with the staff he chose, inspiring a sense of creativity and confidence in those people" (Geffen interview, 7/23/93). What Michael received from the core Heschel school supporters that he didn't have in New Jersey was "a dedicated group of lay people" (Geffen interview, 7/23/93). The executive committee in those days met every Monday night from 8 p.m. to 1 o'clock in the morning.

In the late winter of 1982 the printed brochures entitled Heschel School at the Park Avenue Synagogue were sitting on the receptionist's desk ready to be mailed. Peter was summoned before a new, younger

generation of the temple's leadership. A major confrontation occurred at this meeting. The Board was not going to allow an independent school to be established on its grounds. Obviously, it left Peter devastated. Peter's initial reaction was to put pressure on the Board of the Park Avenue Synagogue to change their minds. When faced with the finality of the decision that the Synagogue would not be the home of the Heschel School, the Board of Trustees sought other alternative sights and arrangements. One such alternative centered on discussions with several parents from another Jewish day school. Ironically, this particular school was housed in the building that eventually became the Heschel School two years later. The Heschel trustees commissioned a feasibility study conducted by Dr. Aryeh Davidson to determine whether these parents and their children could make up the Heschel School population for the 1982-83 school year. Mr. Davidson sent his findings to Peter.

He came back and concluded that this was not a workable group. The numbers were too disparate: the amount of the families that came, the tuition was the reason that school was dying, it should die, and it was not going to help us, and we should just wait another year and open up fresh. Some of those people might come to us. (Geffen interview, 7/23/93)

Peter went on to say:

The numbers were too disparate. These parents paid very little tuition. The school had a dying legacy which would probably not help us. We should probably just wait another year and open up fresh. That gave us a breathing space to look for space. We looked at buildings, but we didn't have any money. Gene Wiener, an original trustee, negotiated this deal with the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue. These negotiations

were not easy because although there was an attractiveness to any synagogue to get income from renting space, (and their space was minimally used), it was a space that had only been used as a Sunday school. Stephen Wise Free Synagogue was built upon several radical concepts. The previous Rabbi, Edward Klein, was one of the staunchest supporters of public schools in the city of New York, and one of the strongest opponents of Jewish day schools. The idea that the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue would house a day school in their midst was as anathema to many members of the Stephen Wise Board. Rabbi Brickner, urged on by Gene Wiener, and knowing many of us from other places, really wanted this to happen, wanted to be helpful, and he pushed it through and succeeded, and we got the right to rent these four classrooms that would house our two classes in that first year. (Geffen interview, 7/23/93)

In the spring of 1983, Michael contacted two colleagues from his days at New Jersey Jewish day schools. Dov Lerea was about to graduate from Rabbinical school and had to decide between accepting a pulpit or staying in education. In June 1983, he chose to teach at the Heschel school. Judith Tumin had already committed herself to another job by the time Michael approached her. She agreed to take the early childhood classroom only if she could leave at 1 o'clock two afternoons a week. Once they had accepted, Judith and Dov met Peter and Rebecca for final approval.

At this point in it's development the "school" was in Michael's apartment. Michael and Dov spent the summer outlining curriculum. Judith also had several responsibilities: she went to parent meetings, helped write some of the early publicity, did purchasing for classroom

materials and furniture, and figured out the room set and design for the PreK/K. Judith describes the school as consisting of :

Two adjoining rooms, that is, they formed an "L" on a corner; that was designated for pre-K/K classroom, and the second space had two rooms that were right across a corridor from each other. You could see from one doorway into the other doorway, and that was designated for the 1st/2nd grade classroom, which lends itself to splitting a little more like that. Having looked at the space, it lent itself most to having a sort of an active room and a quieter room. So one room became blocks, dramatic play, some manipulatives, and the other room became art, reading, cooking, science, and a meeting space. (Interview, 7/18/93)

There were no closets for storage and the one small office was shared by Michael, Judith and the secretary, Bea Silverman. The bathroom for the PreK/K was in a large, empty room that doubled as a play space. The First and Second graders had to use the bathroom one floor below.

It was decided that the school would be staffed "as if there were one teacher in each of the four rooms almost full time" (Tumin interview, 7/18/93). Linda Messing and Beth Levine were hired as part-time teachers for the First and Second grades. Linda taught math and reading in the morning and then returned home to her 18 month old son and outside consulting jobs. Beth taught science, social studies and spelling in the afternoon.

The momentum for families and students had escalated by July 1, 1983. Dov went to several evenings that had been set up for prospective families and the next day he would make follow up phone calls. There

were already several families who were extremely active. A whole network had evolved.

By the fall of 1983, the Abraham Joshua Heschel School opened its doors to 28 children. There were 5 teachers, one secretary and a director on staff.

People, many people, came to visit the newly formed Heschel School. The enrollment for the 1984-85 year rose to 83 and by late 1983 it was obvious that the school needed more space and more money.

In December 1983, the Executive Committee found a relatively abandoned building on West 89th Street. \$150,000 was needed if they were to become involved in the bidding war with the developer. First, Peter and Rebecca went to see Mike Gruss. After a variety of business, legal and real estate questions, Mike proclaimed, "This is a crazy idea. You people are just getting started and you're going to involve yourselves in a physical building with all the the debt that entails--this is going to kill you" (Geffen interview, 7/23/93). After further discussion Mike said, "If you insist on doing this, I'll give you \$50,000 if you can get two other people to give you \$50,000" (Geffen interview, 7/23/93).

One early contributor to the school was an interesting, imaginative 26 year old man named Josh Mailman. Josh and several other "children of wealth" (Geffen interview, 7/23/93) who grew up in the sixties, formed the Threshold Foundation to use some of their money to fund interesting projects--"things of meaning" (Geffen interview, 7/23/93). They were some of the first people to back environmental and ecological causes. Josh had a close friend and fellow member of the Threshold Foundation named Alan Slivka. Josh suggested that Peter set an appointment to meet with Alan. Peter and Rebecca Shahmoon Shanok went to Alan's apartment. They

filled Alan in on the details of the school and Mike Gruss' proposal. Alan asked, "What did Mike say?" (Geffen interview, 7/23/93) He was told that Mike Gruss had offered \$50,000 if they could find two other people who would give \$50,000 each. And Alan immediately said, "Put me down for \$50,000" (ibid). Needless to say, the fund-raisers managed to raise enough money to put a bid in on the 89th Street building. After a protracted legal procedure, the bid was accepted and a mortgage was secured. In the summer of 1984, the Heschel School moved all its belongings and personnel to 270 West 89th Street where it still operates today (see Appendix F).

## PHILOSOPHY

It was Peter Geffen who first envisioned a Jewish school that could be independent of any Jewish movement, pluralistic in its approach to Judaism and egalitarian in the classroom. He was searching for a way to integrate the worlds of Jewish and secular studies.

The integration piece is critical because it has to do with that picture of what American Jewish life should be all about or what is an effective way to ensure the possibility that Jewish life will have some viability and attraction, and I was convinced that would only come through integration. (Geffen interview, 7/23/93)

For example, Jewish schools taught about Israel. In the Park Avenue Synagogue High School in the 1970's, Peter believed in teaching courses about the Middle East and using words like "Palestinian".

'Palestinian' was a political word, loaded and not used, even on television. I was convinced that there was no way to have Jewish education be meaningful and relevant and touch lives if it wasn't part of a integrated whole. To teach about the Arab world in order to more fully understand the Israeli-Jewish world we saw as being critical. (Geffen interview, 7/23/93)

The philosophy of the school was also influenced by the need for an "alternative Jewish school" (Lerea interview, 7/12/93).

'Alternative' in this sense, more than anything else, means an alternative to the presently existing schools. There are only two types of schools in Manhattan- several Orthodox schools and a Reform Hebrew day school. All of the existing schools were affiliated with movements. 'Alternative' meant not only an alternative to the existing

institutions, which I think there is a subtext to regardless of what else is out there, we're going to do it ourselves. 'Alternative' also means a school which is not affiliated with a movement as a self-conscious decision. The school did not want to be bound by a movement. (Lerea interview, 7/12/93)

The attempt to be a pluralistic school "which would be able to appeal to Jews of a wide variety of affiliations, backgrounds, beliefs, and practices" (Lerea interview, 7/12/93) appeared to some people to be a defense against organized religion. "As the mandate of the school broadened out, the policy also broadened out to begin to accommodate some of the people at the other end of the spectrum who really cared about the Halachic interpretations of things" (Tumin interview, 7/18/93).

Regardless of their differences, everyone involved with shaping the philosophy and policies of the school agreed that they wanted to form a . . . . community of children and families in which they continually assert that they have much in common with each other. (That) it's more worth their while to iron out their differences or live with their differences in order to be together than it would be to separate from each other. (Lerea interview, 7/12/93)

This remains a powerful part of the school's mythology to this day.

The founding philosophy also translated into an educational philosophy that holds true to this day.

The educational philosophy of the Abraham Joshua School is grounded in a view of the child as an active shaper of experience and a seeker of meaning. Our concern for the whole child is reflected in ongoing conscious attention to intellectual and emotional growth and the



interplay between them. (Educational and Religious Policy Manual 1993-94, p.1)

From early on everyone involved felt that helping kids develop autonomy and self-esteem was of paramount importance. This was, in some ways, the foundation of the curriculum. Some early programs were deliberately crafted to create an atmosphere that encouraged the whole child to develop and flourish.

There was a lot of consciousness-raising then. Part of our job was to help kids recognize differences, that not all of them were good at everything. That there was no stigma in not being great at something. You had some talents, not others. That was the way of the world. Part of that was helping every kid discover that they did indeed have some talents, and that meant creating classrooms which recognized more than a kid's academic career. (Tumin interview, 7/18/93)

This philosophy of education represented the way the school saw children and the way it expected its' teachers to work with children. It was, and is, expected that the classroom be a "child-centered world" (Tumin interview, 7/18/93). In the beginning, this philosophy of education included classrooms of mixed-age groups which were treated as if they were "a single age group. A curriculum was crafted for them as a community with a larger spectrum of individual needs. We really believed in communities of learners learning together" (Tumin interview, 7/18/93). Ultimately, the mixed-age grouping didn't work. According to Judith, "When you treated (the groups) as if they were an entity, it worked fine. When you treated them as if you had to run two curricula side by side and they were different, it didn't work. It made the teachers crazy" (Tumin interview, 7/18/93).

Throughout the years, the philosophy has remained intact. The main difference between 1983 and 1994 is that the words, ideas, ideals and dreams have been woven into a concise statement that reflects the knowledge and experience of those years.

We seek to educate our students to function competently in and contribute to the world, as Americans and Jews. Our emphasis on integration extends beyond the Jewish and secular to the wide range of intellectual, academic, ethical, artistic, athletic, social and emotional realms in which we assist students to achieve competencies.

Integration can refer to the way we perceive ourselves and others, the way we understand problems and attempt to solve them, or the way we think about experience. It means recognizing the many facets of ourselves and of each other, of a problem, an observation, a question, or an experience. (Educational and Religious Policy Manual 1993-94, p.1)

## ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Prior to the establishment of the Heschel School, there had been numerous attempts over the years to start a new Jewish School. The constituency of the organization was established during meetings in Peter Geffen's living room. Peter recalls at least ten such gatherings and described the structure and outcomes in detail:

The structure (consisted of) a group of parents (who) would invite a bunch of people that they knew and some people they didn't know. They'd sit around and they'd say, you know we're hosting this evening because we're really interested in creating some alternative Jewish day school, radical Jewish day school. There was language of the times. Let's go around the room and find out what everybody thinks. So they would go around the room. By the time they were done with going around the room the project as anything beyond that meeting was completely dead because everybody had a different idea, and there was no way to pull all those things together. So once I took a step in the direction of creating a school, it was clear to me that the only way in which this was going to work is if two things happened: 1) if I articulated what the school was going to look like; 2) then invited people to join it. That way those who didn't like it were obviously free to do something else. I created a descriptive document that my very close friends and colleagues would agree to. It was clear that I was not going to write something that everybody in this sub-group couldn't subscribe to. Once it would go out, it would be a take-it-or-leave-it-thing; it was not open for discussion. That was it. That was what it was. Well, that

was very important because that was the critical thing-- to get beyond those endless living room discussions. (Geffen interview, 7/23/93)

The document Peter wrote eventually became the first brochure, including a picture of Dr. Heschel and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. It was a statement about progressive education that also included a "very clear range of concerns, directions, and options that are all pretty well defined" (Geffen interview, 7/23/93). This was the starting point (see Appendix G).

Originally, there was just an advisory committee that consisted of the names of ten of Peter's friends. State papers were obtained a volunteer attorney, Alan Bandler, filed for incorporation as an educational corporation. For this purpose, it became necessary to have a list of people known as "trustees" (Geffen interview, 7/23/93).

You have to have names, and you have to have a plan. You submit a budget; in those plans, basically, we said school was going to be at the Park Avenue Synagogue, but basically you have to say where it's going to be and what your budget is, what your tuition is going to be, and what your school program is. Then in almost every case, you get a temporary provisional charter, which is good for three years and renewable and eventually has to become a permanent charter by which time you have to produce much more serious stuff, (but not too serious). (Geffen interview, 7/23/93)

Several levels of interrelationships between people began to form. A parent leadership was formed and orchestrated by Harriet Bograd. She did most of the recruiting the first year. "She came aboard early, and she was an incredible force... she was another person the school could not have opened without (Tumin interview, 7/18/93). Harriet was on the phone day and night building the population of the school. Also, a Board of Trustees

was established with Rebecca Shahmoon Shanok as its President and Peter Geffen as the Executive vice-president.

There has to be a Board before there can be a school. It can't be the other way around. Often, it happens in other Jewish day schools, there are two boards. There's what we call a Board of Education, and then there's a Board of Directors. The Board of Directors is the business people, and the Board of Education are educators. Heschel was not structured that way on purpose. Peter very much wanted there to be a board which would be a coalition of business people, educators, other professionals, people in the mental health professions. And that, indeed, was the composition of the Board. But in any event, there's needs to be a board prior to the establishment of the institution so that there can be some type of financial base whether in myth or reality or potential or whatever. So that there was a board and then what there was going to be was a number of committees of the board and one of the committees would be a religious and educational policy committee, which I was asked to join before the school year opened. Once I was really hired, I was asked immediately to participate on that committee, and I've been on that committee for the last 10 years. (Lerea interview, 7/12/93)

The Executive Committee drew up a budget and began to interview people for the headmaster position. Once the interviewing started, a whole new arena of decision-making that would be critical to the school began as well. After the director was chosen, it became necessary to hire the teaching staff. Staffing decisions "would need to be tempered, or at least scrutinized and looked at. There needed to be some sort of monitoring" (Lerea interview, 7/12/93).

Michael began contacting former colleagues regarding available teaching positions. If he decided on someone, that person was interviewed by Peter and Rebecca. It was important to the Executive Committee that the incoming staff be aware of the school's philosophy and beliefs as well as being able to support that ideology in their classrooms. "It's important for the Board and educational professionals and staff to watch each other and respect each other and challenge each other" (Lerea interview, 7/12/93).

It became obvious mid-way through the first year that there was a need for some kind of written curriculum "to show to the public or to a committee of the Board for reflection" (Lerea interview, 7/12/93).

As the school grew there were more people to work with and a need arose to "articulate goals and create systems" (Lerea interview, 7/12/93).

Systems upon which staff could rely for the most basic daily needs, supplies, protocol for taking trips or for scheduling coverage, there was a sense that the more you need to create those types of infrastructures the further away you were getting from the magic of that first year. (Lerea interview, 7/12/93)

A conflict arose between the growing need for structure and the desire to retain the grassroots ideals the school was founded on.

There was a type of nostalgia for the magic of that early year, or the first two years rather than a drive to try to project the vision that would be very clear-- future directed. Plus the staff and students really did grow very quickly. We went from 28 to 83 to 103 and suddenly, you had a lot of people. You needed a lot of systems, and there was a lot of resistance to creating positions. Names. Assistant Principal, this is your job, this is what you do. There was a resistance . . . Every point

along the way has been difficult in the sense of a continuity, a uniformity of vision and working towards it methodically. It's always a goulash. A lot of things going on all the time, and it tends to say it can't only . . . you can't just say like this month we're going to just eat the carrots in the goulash because that's what we're attuned to doing. In other words, you have to step back and take a look at the whole thing and then decide where you're going to work, set priorities, and if you set the priorities every year, that means you're not going to set them over there, and you're going to have to live with that, and that's just okay. We never seemed to be able to do that for one reason or another. In other words, if staff said that, four members in committee would say not good enough. We're a big school on the West Side of Manhattan people coming to see the school have to see a mature program, and someone from the Board would say hold on, let them focus over here not over there. Teachers would say, where are we going? What are we doing over here? Maybe that's it, something like that, maybe because it's a pluralistic school. (Lerea interview, 7/12/93)

Peter did not see these discrepancies as a problem. His approach was to listen. He realized that a lot of things needed to be done. The Peter Geffen approach was:

Look at the vision of this school, look at where this school's taking us, and look what the needs are for the next generation. That plus never lose sight of the bigger picture. The bigger picture is basically in place; it's basically being put there by people who have that vision and don't ever forget that. This isn't getting done over there, so we'll work on that. Okay, so now we know, so let's move forward, but never forget

this is basically the big picture. I think that's a very important perspective. (Lerea interview, 7/12/93)

Out of this emerged certain values of leadership:

The director needs to help move the staff towards that implementation in very specific ways, in ways which inspire and engender trust and also reflect educational ability to do that in specific ways. The staff needs to be in concert with each other. (Lerea interview, 7/12/93)

In the beginning, Michael sat on the Education and Religious Policies Committee and then it broadened out to include Dov. It was two more years before a classroom teacher was included. When the Personnel Practices Committee was formed, Mel Evans, the school treasurer, was Chairman. Michael was the administrative representative and Judith the teacher representative. The Committee also included an "Argentinean unionist" (Tumin interview, 7/18/93) from the Melton Center and a lay person named Gladys Grunwald.

They would write these policies that would take months of arguing over sentences in the policies. For the most part, they were observed more in the breach than in the observance because they were nice and they spoke well about the values and the underlying philosophy, but they didn't talk a lot about implementation. Sometimes they were hard to implement and sometimes they were (useless). (Tumin interview, 7/18/93)

In the past eleven years the organizational leadership along with the educational and religious policies has been refined, defined and put into manuals that are distributed at the beginning of every school year. The confusion has been eliminated and replaced with very clear guidelines.



Judith Tumin's final reflection takes one on a journey from the days that the school was defining itself to the present:

I think the school is both more and less than we ever dreamed it would be. It was hard to look at those rented classrooms, over the heads of 28 kids and imagine a school of 350 kids in its own building, with facilities, with a full range of specialty teachers, with kids you weren't ever going to know, with an office staff of thousands. . . . It's hard to go from intimacy to bigness. I think we have great nostalgia for the intimacy. . . . to know something about each one of those kids and their families . . . We were building something. When you build it and you build it in your own image of it, you're invested in that in an enormous ways. As the population gets more diverse, as more people are building, you have less ownership of the image . Individual contributions are less visible in the larger group and, on the other hand, there are a lot of other people to share the work to bring new ideas and to refertilize it. I think we are serving a different community now than we did 10 years ago. Ten years ago we were serving a community almost entirely composed of leftover Sixties people who were raising their kids. The school they needed looked a little different than the school our population now needs. We live in the real world; we are sending kids into the real world, and I think we are sending kids well prepared for the real world, and I hope still with some innocence and some real idealism about what they can do in that world. I hope it's a long time until they get very cynical . . . There's plenty of time to find that out for yourself. As long as we haven't misled children, which I don't think we have, then I think we've blessed them by allowing them to have some years of childhood in which their beliefs are powerful. I think as the school has gotten more stable, it has in some ways also gotten more formal. In

an effort to bring things to a standard because we had many things that were well beyond standard—they were brilliant—and a fairly large number of things that were less than we might desire . . . . We never wanted to be like the competition. We want to be distinctly ourselves, so there's a lot of balancing. Now the balancing doesn't always get done perfectly, and in any given years you might spend your whole life sort of fighting affirmative action programs to redress past years when the balance had swung off in a different direction. I think it feels like the phase we're going into now is a phase with more balance between doing stuff like what we're doing here, which is interesting and exciting, and if it comes off, we'll really pull together for kids a whole world of things. As I said, I think we're also reinvesting excitement as it spills over into other curricular themes and areas. . . . For me, it's been the most satisfying years of my teaching . . . . Heschel proved to be a very good place; it kept saying 'go for it'. I'd like it not to lose that piece. I'd like teachers to feel that message from the school - - so let's go for it! (Interview, 7/18/93)

## TEACHING & CURRICULUM

The use of multiple perspectives and positive differences in terms of working through organic matters of school life helped to shape the kind of teaching and curriculum that would be the Heschel School.

Dov Lerea recalls his first interview with Peter Geffen, the founder and Rebecca Shanook Shannon, the Board President, "It was like a bunch of people trying to find their way in the dark by talking. Rebecca was coming from a mental health perspective. I sort of had the view that the lines between Jewish and general studies should really move organically between each other" (Interview, 9/12/93). Peter was searching for a way to integrate Jewish and general studies and incorporate the values of social justice and community concern into the curriculum.

From the very beginning, Dov and the Director, Michael Wolff were "working with a language of integration in TEAM TEACHING." According to Dov, ". . . there were different levels of interaction between people and there were different levels of interaction around the use of language that created the mythology and culture of the school" (Interview, 9/12/93). For Dov, the interaction was the language. For Michael, the language was a way to be "pinned down" (Lerea interview, 7/12/93).

According to Linda Messing, the first year at the school "there were structures for team teaching but there weren't the supports to teach teachers how to do it" (Interview, 7/15/93). Part of the reason the teachers lacked structure was because Michael felt "there was no need to go and look at what other people were doing" (Lerea interview, 7/12/93). Michael saw the new School as an opportunity to "build on things that they (the

teachers) had found were successful and implement them and take it from there" (Lerea interview, 7/12/93).

In theory, this was very exciting to everyone involved in curriculum development and teaching. It gave new dimensions to everything. "The flip side of that" said Dov, "was the inclination not to do what has been done anywhere else. One needed to presuppose that everything had to be newly invented" (Interview, 7/12/93).

And invent they did on a daily basis. Linda recalls that she, Dov and Beth Levine regularly decided where they were going and what were the "over-arching themes" (Interview, 7/15/93). Through constant reshaping of outcomes and goals, the curricular process evolved and eventually they "hit upon transformation" (Messing interview, 7/15/93). For example, Dov was discussing Kashrut (Kosher laws) as it applied to fish. It occurred to Linda that some of the students had probably not seen scales or fins, so she went to the market and came back with different kinds of fish: shrimp, octopus, and flounder. According to Linda, "It was a wonderful thing. Everyone made drawings, the kids did scales, we included some science - there was a real give and take" (Interview, 7/15/93).

What was clear to everyone was that they wanted to create a school that had a lot of "Jewish atmosphere" (Tumin interview, 7/18/93). There was Hebrew language and print in every classroom, and all the Jewish holidays were celebrated. Margie Klein, one of the original 28 students and a Heschel school graduate, recalls learning Hebrew from two puppets named Uzzi and Peleg when she was in First and Second grade. During the month of Adar, everyone had fun as they prepared for Purim. Margie still remembers her first "Silly Socks Day" and how she and her classmates

danced around Michael "in his elaborately colored socks" (Graduation essay, 6/92).

Judith Tumin wanted a strong pre-reading program in the Pre K/K which involved using phonics based on "sort of a do-it-yourself text that helped kids do sounds, letter identification and then begin to blend words" (Interview, 7/18/93). She did a lot of work with experience charts and wrote as a group almost every day. All the songs were on experience charts. The cooking charts moved from "pictograph to words" (Tumin interview, 7/18/93) by the end of the first year.

Linda Messing taught reading to six groups of First-Second graders. One child could barely speak English (having been recently adopted from Central America) and one had a lot of reading issues, so Linda planned different activities to accommodate her students. Three groups would be reading on their own, two groups would be doing pages in workbooks and Linda could spend some individual time playing reading games and working with the two who needed extra help.

Judith felt it was important to encourage "life-cycle celebrations" (birthdays) (Interview, 7/18/93). Everyone agreed that they wanted it to be a part of the program. On that day, the day centered around the birthday child. "Allowing that child to have some choices and decision-making power made it into a child's activity" (Tumin interview, 7/18/93) Classmates could make a group card or mural, parents could be invited to share the birthday party, the birthday child got to choose what treat would be baked that day and what gift to present to the class. This particular celebration is still upheld in every Early Childhood class.

In both classes, math was taught with the use of manipulatives and some packaged programs of which CEMEREL is still used today. Judith

refined her curricular sequence of activities that led towards number operations. One was a Pattern Block sequence that involved fractions. Her cooking program included fractional parts and metric measurements. Linda and others later wrote a "scope and sequence of basically math stuff" (Messing interview, 7/15/93). They ended up with a list of terms, subjects and areas "that the children were going to meet at a certain level" (ibid).

As was stated from the beginning, the School wanted to connect to the outside community "because you live in a real world, and the world doesn't only happen inside the classroom. You take things . . . you go to see things as they happen; you bring things back into your classroom from the outside world" (Tumin interview, 7/18/93). One year, one of the classrooms went to visit the construction site right next to the school. They interviewed the workers and eventually established that they would visit every Thursday and bring some baked goods to share. The class kept an ongoing journal of the way the building went up and what each stage looked like.

Social studies centered a great deal around the Jewish holidays, but there was a "fair amount of neighborhood stuff as well" (Tumin interview, 7/18/93). The school established a relationship with an "old age home" (Tumin interview, 7/18/93) located nearby. Once a month, the children went to the Home carrying their projects with them to share.

Science in both grades was hands-on. Judith developed an oil experiment that accompanied the study of Hanukkah. Linda and Beth "controlled erupting vinegar and baking soda volcanoes" (Klein graduation essay, 6/92).

That first year, the staff of the Heschel school developed innovative, creative ways to teach unhindered by hierarchy of structure and function.

All the teachers interviewed felt supported by Michael as they found their way and created this new School. "There was something about (Michael's) trust in our competence and professionalism that if we said we thought we needed it, he would find a way to get it for us" (Messing interview, 7/15/93).

## THE HESCHEL SCHOOL TODAY

Today, the Heschel School is still located on West 89th, between Broadway and West End Avenue. The building, originally known as the Goldstein Community Center of B'nai Jeshurun, was purchased by the Heschel School on April 4, 1983. From 1984 until 1994, the building was known as the Henry Lindenbaum Jewish Community Center. In 1994, that name was removed from the building's facade and assigned to the lower school division of The Abraham Joshua Heschel School. At present, there are 325 students and 83 people working at the school including faculty, administrative staff, specialists, office staff, and building staff. A large segment of the Heschel School population lives within a mile of the school, although there are students from all parts of Manhattan including Washington Heights and Battery Park City. Some students live in The Bronx, parts of Brooklyn and Queens. At present, all the students are Caucasian and Jewish. About ten percent of the School's population is Russian. These children and their families are recent immigrants and are able to attend the school on scholarship.

The educational philosophy of the school has maintained all of the original ideals on which it was founded. In the 1993-94 Educational and Religious Policy handbook, it states:

We seek to educate our students to function competently in and contribute to the world, as Americans and Jews. Our emphasis on integration extends beyond the Jewish and secular to the wide range of intellectual, academic, ethical, artistic, athletic, social and emotional realms in which we assist students to achieve competencies.

Integration can refer to the way we perceive ourselves and others, the



way we understand problems and attempt to solve them, or the way we think about experience ( p.1).

A key component of integration . . . is attention to multiple perspectives. We believe that an appreciation of multiple perspectives on intellectual, social, and ethical phenomena, events and problems is essential to the ability to think critically and imaginatively. We believe that this ability is essential to original expression, communication, and understanding, and that it is best developed in a social context. We want children to learn about each other and about different ways of viewing the world by sharing ideas and perceptions. We believe that despite the confusion inherent in multiple perspectives, helping children to view and think about experiences from several vantage points rather than to expect or seek one 'right answer', will best equip them for the realities of a complex world. This is both a cognitive goal of the School program, and a basic value implicit in our view of Judaism.

(Educational and Religious Policy Manual, 1993-94, p.2)

The participants I interviewed agreed that the school has fulfilled and gone beyond its' original expectations. Judith Tumin summed it all up when she described the "typical" Heschel graduate:

(The) ideal graduate is a child who sees him/her self as a continuing learner and finds joy in that. Someone who is a 'mensch' in his or her relationships with others. (A mensch is a person) who feels both responsible for the world as it is and empowered to make it better than it is and who goes into his/her next community asking not what can I get from it, but what can I give it. (Interview, 7/18/93)

As September 1994 approaches, the Heschel School finds itself expanding to include a second building to house the Middle School

students. The building has 5 floors and 20,000 square feet. Plans currently call for six classrooms, a library, lunch room, gym, synagogue, and a variety of specialty rooms for art, music, computers, science and student support services.

The present building at the 89th Street facility will also be renovated and enhanced over the next few years. This will include updating and expanding classroom space, renovating and redesigning roof playgrounds, and expanding space for support services. To facilitate this growth and expansion, the HESCHEL 2000 Capital Campaign was formed. The goal of the Campaign is \$15,000,000. Heschel families are being asked to raise 10% of the total goal (\$1,500,000). Community philanthropists and foundations are expected to provide the other 90% or \$13,500,000 (Heschel 2000 newsletter, 1993).

In addition to the above HESCHEL 2000 Capital Campaign, there is also an Annual Fund campaign. This consists of fundraising efforts and events that are needed to meet actual operating deficits each year. The deficits are due to the fact that it costs \$3,200 more per child than the actual tuition of \$11,000 per year covers. The Auction, Benefit, and Journal are all activities included in the Annual Fund. As this campaign raises only a portion of the Fund's goals, the balance must be raised through solicitations and grant-seeking. "The Annual Campaign Fund has had to raise between \$750,000 to \$1,000,000 annually over the past few years" (Geffen interview, 3/17/94).

When the new building opens in September 1994, the Heschel School will have grown to 380 students and will be able to accommodate the final goal of 450 students. It will be able to provide two classes per grade from Nursery through Eighth grade. Quite a long way to come in 11 years.

## DISCUSSION

In July, 1989, I moved from San Diego, California to Manhattan to begin a job at the Heschel School. The School was beginning its' sixth year and was being run by its' second Director, Baruch Rand. I was assigned to teach the last mixed-age group of 6,7, and 8 year olds. There were 10 boys in the Second grade, 2 boys and 8 girls in the First grade. I was told that the class would be well matched academically because the Second graders had finished at the "bottom" of their class the previous year and the First graders had finished at the "top" of their Kindergarten. I had a partner who only taught Hebrew, Judaica and one advanced reading group. There was no set curricula and 6 of the 8 First and Second grade teachers were new to the School. We ended up teaching the group of First graders together and the Second graders by themselves. We were continually reshaping the curricula.

In 1990, a new director took over. She was different than anything the Heschel School had known before. She immediately began establishing an organizational hierarchy that would set up definitive roles for administrators and standards of behavior for teachers as well as increase revenue and enrollment. From that moment on the Heschel School lost its' grassroots flavor and was on its way to becoming a business.

Now I'm in the education "business". All teachers have to attend weekly faculty meetings, hand in lesson plans a month in advance for approval, submit a script for Parent Night, as well as conforming to dress code. My supervisor is in my room to perform observations on a daily basis. The questions and suggestions lead me to interpret them as verbal

demands. Essentially, there is a loss of autonomy. A paragraph from the 1993-94 Teacher's Manual states that,

... as a member of the Abraham Joshua Heschel faculty, you are the most important representative of the school. You represent the entire school, not only your classroom. Your main identity with the outside world is as a member of the staff. At no time can you separate publicly your professional position from your other identities (Professional Ethics section H2).

From October to March there are frequent organized tours of the school for parents who want to apply for admission. At these times it is the duty of the staff to maintain quiet, decorum, and the utmost professionalism. According to the 1993-94 Teacher's Manual:

... not only is it important that the school be well-run, well-maintained, creative and stimulating, but also that it physically reflect these characteristics. Clean, orderly hallways and decorated walls convey a sense of respect for our school environment and pride in our work. Classroom and hallway bulletin boards speak loudly and reflect classroom activities, so use them for that purpose (Duties of Teachers section G1).

The structure of the building also creates a source of concern. At present, we don't have proper bathroom facilities for the Kindergarten children. There is no water fountain near the two available play areas, some classrooms don't have sinks but the hallways are always shiny and clean. I feel as though we are a book being judged by its collective cover.

It must be said that I have learned a lot at the Heschel School. I had twelve years experience under my belt when I came to New York yet each year here, my teaching has improved. I have come to more fully

understand that learning situations are sustained by being attentive to each child's particular developmental stage and style of learning by being both prepared and flexible enough to keep up with these demands. Moreover, the focus by the teacher on the process of learning rather than the end result, is an important aspect of work with children. For example, the final painting produced by a child receives less attention than the actual process of the way the child moves the brushes across the page or mixes the shades.

My classroom is set up so that the carpeted front room is used for blocks, dress-up, a quiet book area, shelves filled with activities that be used on the floor, and a group meeting space. The second room is full of windows and bright light. There is enough seating for every child in the class to participate in a group lunch. This is also the place where all the table activities take place. There are plenty of low shelves strategically placed around the room and organized so that the children can choose art, writing, math, language arts, and science materials on their own. Also in this room is a sand/water table, an easel for painting and shelves which house the children's storage bins (see Appendix H). In general, the materials in use in this classroom are very unstructured ones, suitable for full exploration by the children in their solitary, parallel, or cooperative play. There is a good balance between short-term and long-term projects for the children to select. Also, there is an effective rotation of materials, some more frequently used than others, that provide both change and consistency. The primary function of the teacher is "first to orchestrate the environment and then to maximize the use of it for individual children" (Lubeck, 19, p. 223).

Over the years, the school has developed a whole language, whole child integrated program. Our units are planned according to the Bank Street curricular WEB theory. Language, art, music, science, social studies, and math, are all part of a Judaic/Secular unit of study. This is certainly what Lucy Sprague Mitchell had envisioned when she wrote Young Geographers, (1934/1963) "...curriculum planning should be part of a child's experience...their curriculum furnishes a field for explorations and discoveries" (p.16).

The teaching profession loses when in the administrative eye the value shifts from a person-centered business to a money making business. The parents are courted and accommodated for their monetary value. The children are valued and validated as a commodity. In the process, it is the teachers who lose their voice. Michael W. Apple (1982) says that we need to see the "ultimate effects of technical/administrative knowledge as being generated out of contradictory pressures forced upon it" (p.66).

When the Heschel School began in 1983, its teachers were sustained by "the trust in (their) competence and professionalism" (Messing interview, 7/15/93). It was an organizationally evolving, child-centered school, facilitated by a teacher-centered environment that allowed for maximum individual growth and self-esteem building for students, teachers, parents and administrators alike. Since 1990, the school has become more organizationally stable (see Appendix I ). The formality enforced by the school's third director and various supervisors of her choosing has literally dissolved any autonomy and decision-making power of the classroom teachers which existed in the early years. The school has become administratively top-heavy as well as heavy-handed. For

harmony, happiness, and creativity to again prosper, the classroom teachers need to be able to voice concerns, ask critical questions, reveal what is frustrating without fear of reprisal. In order to do this, participating teachers need to feel and be valued. Dialog between administration and staff is an imperative part of the process where both parties can speak and be heard. A place where dialog opens up avenues of deeper growth and understanding.

Much of the written literature regarding the school and its philosophical beliefs for students speaks of value claims such as encouraging and appreciating different points of view. This should apply to teachers as well. The Handbooks should be rewritten accordingly:

Through the classroom experience, students (and administrators) are encouraged to appreciate different points of view--academically and in their life beyond the classroom. We, (the teachers), believe that this appreciation of multiple perspectives on intellectual, social, and ethical phenomena events and problems is essential to (our) ability to think critically and imaginatively.

## MY ROLE AS A TEACHER WITHIN THE ORGANIZED STRUCTURE

I have (by chance) over the years taught at several schools with pre-determined educational prescriptions - Montessori, a Jewish day school, and a West Indian government school. I rarely questioned the basic structure, preferring to leave that structure in place so that I could do as I pleased INSIDE my classroom. I have always found comfort and freedom in this way of teaching. Like Maxine Greene's compelling interpretation of an article written by Josef Skvorecky, "There is no consciousness of obstruction, no resentment or restraint . . ." (1988, p.11). Greene goes on to say, "If there is nothing a person particularly wants to say, s/he will not suffer from censorship or controls of freedom of speech. The individual simply feels free: It is no different than breathing; the condition simply is" (1988, p.11).

Recently, I began to feel uncomfortable and self-conscious about my role as an educational practitioner. On some level, the realization that there is a better world outside the one I've created and sustained has shattered my preconceptions. My initial response in reading three different yet interrelated concepts made me question what makes an educator. Voices such as Maxine Greene, George Counts and John Dewey discuss real freedom having to do with moral and pedagogical commitment and being part of something bigger than ourselves. Also, as we need to reach for power ourselves. Dewey (1938/1963) then inspires us to relate the development of experience as a teacher as a process of interaction. Ultimately, this means that education is basically a social process. One realization is that I have not yet "committed to framing an intelligent theory"



or philosophy of experience. I feel like I am "at the mercy of every intellectual breeze that happens to blow by" (Dewey, 1938/1963 , p.51).

When I am feeling the reality of "consciousness of self" (Pignatelli, 1992), I acknowledge that the discomfort that I am feeling is just part of the evolutionary process. I do not yet know what action to take in the face of this new knowledge. I need to redefine myself outside of the old context. This is a time of reflection of who I am, what I do, what I think. It is also time for reflective steps within broader contexts.

Until recently, I never questioned what it meant for a teacher to be socially responsible. I never thought of myself as having an opportunity to address issues of social justice. Yet I do continue to think about myself as a nurturing sort of socializing agent from the perspective of encouraging the children to work out their personal differences with words, to share classroom materials, be polite, and clean up after themselves. I think of myself as a liberator when I expose children to the wonders of transforming a seed into a plant, a sound into a written letter, or three letters into a written word. As time progressed and I began the journey with this paper, words and thoughts regarding the possibilities were unleashed. Instead of my usual Bowles and Gintis (1976) attitude of inserting people into the structure of education that is reflective of the structure of corporate society, I saw the possible optimism of my role as a socializing and liberating agent via actively participating in change making.

What I have yet to grasp is the liberating concept of reinventing one's self. Within a larger context, Paulo Freire (1970) says that the way people react in the world is a result of how they view themselves. It is incumbent upon teachers and students to be constant mirrors for one another. I regard myself as one who exists in a world of ideas. By

discussing these ideas with my students in order to create a dialog and a "living culture" (Lightfoot, 1978) in my classroom, I am also allowing them to reflect upon their world, and helping them become critical thinkers.

Education should allow people to see the deeper implications of things and to reflect upon them. W. E. B. Du Bois(1903/1969) made a plea for an ethic of "caring" in his early writings. He said that we need to take care of ourselves and others-- not only our economic viability. Education becomes a means whereby a person can become conscious of larger implications- social and human. Once a person becomes conscious of him/herself, way of thinking, acting, speaking, relating to others and the world, then one can begin the process of becoming "fully human" (Freire, 1970, p.61).

As people, we are a work in progress. It is this "unfinished character" that Freire (1970, p.72) speaks of that views education as an ongoing activity throughout the human experience. Each day we learn new things about ourselves and the world around us. Our perception of reality is constantly changing and in order to transform ourselves we need to understand where we've been in order to know where we are going, so we can build a better future not only for ourselves but the society we live in.

I think that we can all agree that the education system in this country is not above prejudice, intellectual and economic elitism, or corporate capitalism, so to dwell on it serves little purpose. As teachers we must constantly remind each other that there are things we can do in our classrooms to begin making changes. We can sketch out a landscape in our classrooms and schools that motivate children so they can tune in to the ongoing dialogue. We can praise individual expression, idiosyncrasies, and differences. We can help our students to think more

critically and to think about others and effectively live in a group. In becoming fully human, we can form a fellowship (Freire, 1970, p.73) that necessitates that education be an ongoing activity. I agree with Du Bois and Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot when they talk about bringing richness, culture and playfulness of learning back into the classroom. What a liberating concept!

It is also very important that the corporate or administrative hierarchy allow teachers to participate in the decision making processes that affect their classrooms. Du Bois (1903/1969) says that "the tree is only as good as its' roots" (p.116). Nussbaum (1988) says that the school is only as good as the individuals that make it up and collectively contribute. This is the place to begin building the foundation.

My goal as an early childhood educator is to present both sides of many issues in an attempt to counter the negative influences of artificial dichotomies which serve to separate the collective affirmation of experience. Like Dewey, I believe teachers must make an effort to honor the needs of individual children and to recognize the pluralistic society we live in even in our school. Like Du Bois and Freire, I believe one goal is to help children develop an understanding that our security and strength as individuals comes from our interconnectedness with others. As teachers, we want our students to learn that all forms of life are precious and to believe that they will benefit greatly from the presence of those different from themselves. This is supported by Darwin who through his scientific research discovered that an environment tends to be richer and more sustaining to all life in its' boundaries when many different varieties of life forms exist within the environment (Perry, 1992).

It's more than just a matter of civil rights or fair representation, it's a matter of expanding our humanity.

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## APPENDICES

Appendix A

Letter To School Board



June 22, 1993

Dear Members of the Board of Trustees,

In May, 1993, I completed 42 hours towards a Masters Degree in Early Childhood Education at Bank Street College. Now it is time to begin my thesis and I have chosen to write an oral history of the Heschel School and its' beginnings. I chose this topic because as my commitment to the school becomes deeper and more profound I find that I want to know more about the history and vision that began it all. Thanks to you, I will be attending the Melton Institute this summer along with five of the school's original staff/administration. This would be an incredible opportunity to begin interviewing these people. I hope my desire to do this project meets with your approval.

I'd also like to take this opportunity to thank you for allowing me to experience Israel for the first time in such a meaningful way.

Sincerely,

Appendix B

Follow-Up Letter to Board of Directors



**THE ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL SCHOOL**  
270 West 89th Street • New York City 10024 • 212 595-7087 • Fax: 212 595-7252

Roanna Shorofsky  
*Director*

**Board of Trustees**  
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*President*

Ria Gruss  
*Vice President*

Alan B. Slifka  
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Steven J. Shaw  
Charles E. Silberman

Peter A. Geffen  
*Founder*

Rebecca Shahmoon Shanok  
*Founding President*

Mrs. Sylvia Heschel  
*Honorary President*

David L. Katsky, Esq.  
*Counsel*

Fri, Jul 23, 1993

Dear :

As you know, I am undertaking to write an oral history of the establishment of the Abraham Joshua Heschel School as part of the fulfillment of my requirements for my masters degree at Bank Street College of Education (the "College"). I appreciate the sensitivity of the writing and/or publishing of a history of the School and therefore agree to the following:

1. That I will not publish or otherwise distribute my thesis paper other than to fulfill the requirements of my degree without the prior written consent of the President and Director of the Abraham Joshua Heschel School. Any publication to fulfill the requirements of my degree will be solely for that purpose and will not be distributed to anyone other than those at the "College" who will be given copies solely for that purpose.
2. I agree to submit my final draft for factual review prior to submission to Bank Street. I understand that Peter Geffen along with others will perform this function for the School and I agree to make any and all factual changes identified in this process.

Sincerely yours,

Joan Yotive

Appendix C

Interview Questions

## Interview Guide

1. What was the founding philosophy of the school?
  - a. What was the need in the community?
  - b. Why the Upper West Side?
  
2. What was your role?
  - a. Given the philosophy of the school, what was important for you to include in the classroom and curriculum?
  - b. How did that relate to how and what you taught?
  
3. How did you decide on teachers to hire?
  - a. Pupil selection?
  
4. What was the parent involvement and reaction?
  
5. What do you think were your special contributions to the founding (or formulation) of the school?
  
6. The school as it is today, do you think it has fulfilled the original expectations?
  - a. In what ways has it not?

SUPPLEMENTAL QUESTIONS THAT CAME UP WHILE INTERVIEWING  
VARIOUS INFORMANTS:

- How was the education policy determined?
- Who set the education policy?
- What subjects were taught?
- What was the nature of the educational leadership?
- When did the Board come into being?
- Did the Board have an agenda? Was the Board effective?
- What were the assessment goals?
- Did you attempt to measure the achievements and goals?
- What were the "roads not taken"?
- What was the student involvement in the learning?
- Describe the layout of the classrooms.
- Was the classroom the locus of most learning or was there an expectation that the children would learn from the outside community, home, the streets?
- What sorts of theories of learning and child development were at work in designing the form of learning?

Appendix D

Provisional Charter

# The University of the State of New York

Education



Department

## PROVISIONAL CHARTER

### ABRAHAM JOSEPH HESCHEL SCHOOL

THIS INSTRUMENT WITNESSETH THAT the Regents of the University of the State of New York have granted this provisional charter, valid for a term of 2 years.

1. Incorporating Lavey J. Derby, Peter A. Coffen, Jacqueline Gutwirth, John Kusky, Eugene Weiner, and Laura Wolff, and their associates and successors, as an educational corporation under the name Abraham Joshua Heschel School, to be located in the city, county, and state of New York.

2. The purpose for which such corporation is to be formed is to establish, conduct, and operate a school which will offer a combined Jewish and general education for students from kindergarten through sixth grade.

3. Lavey J. Derby, Peter A. Coffen, Jacqueline Gutwirth, Neil Kaunfer, Karen Sue Kessler, Daniel Moss, John Kusky, Michael Strausfeld, Eugene Weiner, and Laura Wolff shall constitute the first board of trustees. The board shall have power to adopt by-laws, including therein provisions fixing the method of election and the term of office of trustees, and shall have the right to vote of two-thirds of all the members of the board of trustees to fix the precise number of the trustees to be not more than 25 nor less than 5.

4. The corporation hereby created shall be a nonstock corporation organized and operated exclusively for education purposes, and no part of the net earnings of the corporation shall inure to the benefit of any individual. No officer, member, or employee of the corporation shall receive any pecuniary profit from the operations thereof, except reasonable compensation for services.

5. Notwithstanding any other provision of these articles, the corporation shall not carry on any other activities not permitted to be carried on (a) by a corporation exempt from federal income tax under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1954 (or the corresponding provision of any future United States Internal Revenue Law) or (b) by a corporation, contributions to which are deductible under section 170(c)(2) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1954 (or the corresponding provisions of any future United States Internal Revenue Law).

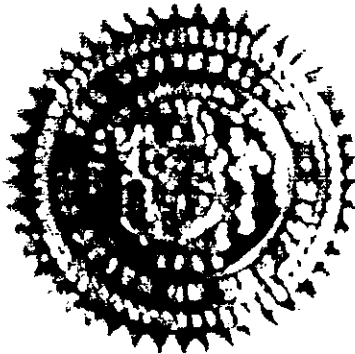
6. The principal office of the corporation is to be located in the city, county, and state of New York.



Provisional Charter  
ABRAHAM JOSEPH HIRSCHL SCHOOL  
Page Two

7. The Commissioner of Education is designated as the representative of the corporation upon whom process in any action or proceeding against it may be served.

8. This provisional charter will be made absolute if, within 3 years, the corporation shall acquire resources and equipment available for its use and support and sufficient and suitable for its chartered purposes in the judgment of the Regents of the University, and by maintaining an institution of educational usefulness and character satisfactory to them. Prior to the expiration of said 3-year period, an application for the renewal of this provisional charter or for an absolute charter will be entertained by the Regents, but in the event that such application is not made, then at the expiration of said 3-year term, and upon notice by the Regents, this provisional charter shall terminate and become void and shall be surrendered to the Regents.



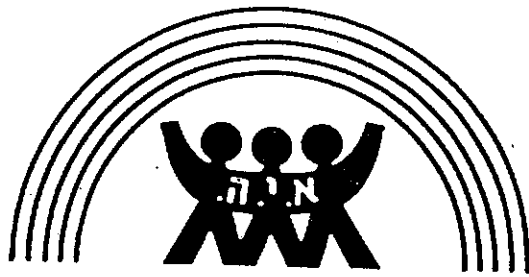
Granted June 26, 1951 by the  
Board of Regents of The University  
of the State of New York and  
executed under the seal of said  
University.  
Number 18,158.

*William A. Egan*  
Chancellor

*John M. Auld*  
President of The University  
and Commissioner of Education

Appendix E

School Logo



Appendix F

Newsletter Article

## NEWS FROM THE HESCHEL SCHOOL

July 18, 1984

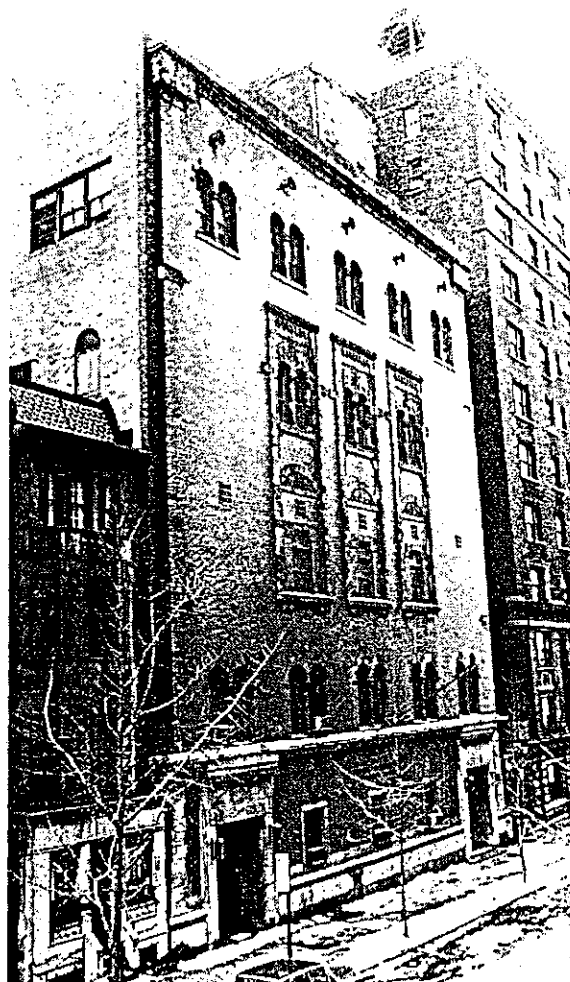
Tammuz 18, 5744

### Home At Last

We are pleased to report that we have moved into our new home at the Henry Lindenbaum Jewish Community Center. The building is marvelous, although we have much work to do for September. We have been working with an architect on an exciting design for the classrooms and offices which will be on the fifth floor by September. At present, our offices are on the second floor, and we welcome visitors. We have had some problem with our telephone (several people have reported difficulty getting through) but we hope to have that problem solved soon. If you are trying to reach us by phone, do not despair, try dialing again.

### Three Year Old Program

We are also pleased to announce that in addition to our Pre-Kindergarten through Fifth Grade program, the Heschel School is also now accepting applications for a nursery program for three year olds. The program will be limited to ten children with priority given to siblings of Heschel School students. The program will be available five days a week, although families interested in enrolling a child for only three or four days a week are also invited to apply. The program will run from 8:30 to 3:30, but parents interested in a shorter day for their child are also welcome. If you are interested in enrolling a child in the program, or know someone who is, please call the school office for an application and for further information.



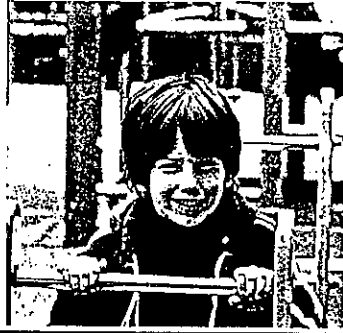
Appendix G

School Brochure

ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL SCHOOL  
270 West 89th Street • New York, New York 10024 • (212) 595-7087

The ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL SCHOOL was founded in 1980 by Jewish educators, professionals, business people and others committed to a school of excellence which addresses itself, openly and honestly, to the most important issues confronting American Jewish life. The School is unique in that it is independent of any synagogue or organization, and is committed to the whole scope of Jewish belief and practice, rather than any one view. Beginning with 28 students in 1983, today the School has 215 students from pre-kindergarten through the eighth grade.

The School is named to honor the memory of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, known as "one of the most beloved and respected voices in American Judaism". Heschel was a prominent scholar, philosopher, and theologian, and from the 1960's until his death in 1972, he assumed a role of social leadership rarely attained by a religious leader.



Using Heschel's life and his writings as an inspiration, the School offers an innovative approach to learning, weaving together the worlds of Jewish and general studies. Our students are encouraged to play an active role in contemporary affairs through a curriculum which uses Jewish tradition and history as a starting point to grapple with the social and ethical issues of our times.

Educational Goals for our students reflect their age and growth, and are viewed in the context of our longer-range vision of education as a developmental process. In the youngest years, we are primarily concerned with providing an inviting atmosphere in which each child will explore and adjust to the environment. Beginning in the first grade, we create the foundations in the specific linguistic, mathematical and critical thinking skills essential to academic mastery and intellectual excellence in later years.

An Integrated Curriculum is a central feature of the Heschel School's program. Jewish and secular studies are integrated through the wide range of intellectual, academic, ethical, artistic, athletic, social, and emotional realms in which students achieve competency. Through the classroom experience, students are encouraged to appreciate different points of view -- academically and in their life beyond the classroom. We believe that this appreciation of multiple perspectives on intellectual, social, and ethical phenomena, events, and problems is essential to the ability to think critically and imaginatively.



"...to educate means to meet the inner needs, to respond to the inner goals of the child."

*Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel*



Critical Thinking Skills are emphasized because of our belief that they are essential to original expression, communication and understanding. We are committed to helping children view and think about their experiences from several different vantage points, rather than to expect or seek "one right answer". We believe that this perspective will best equip them for the realities of a complex world. This is both a goal of the School program and a basic value implicit in our view of Judaism and the world.

High Teacher-Student Ratios and the presence of at least two teachers in each classroom enables the faculty to devote considerable attention to each child, both in the classroom and in staff discussion and preparation time. Instruction and assignments are tailored to the level most likely to challenge each child to his/her limits, without excessive pressure or frustration. While emphasizing structured opportunities for children to pursue their individual interests, substantial time is also devoted to group activities and lessons.

Appendix H

Classroom Floor Plan





Appendix I

Organizational Leadership

