

## Jewish Art Education: It's About the Process, People

By Rae Antonoff

Imagine you're walking down the halls of a religious school. Lining the walls outside most of the classrooms you see the walls papered with pictures depicting creation, a shelf of clay menorahs, perhaps a few dozen sand-art representations of the Maccabees, dozens of *tchotchkes* which will be sent home on the last day and likely end up in the trash can. But at the end of the hallway, you come across the eighth grade classroom, and the wall outside it is empty. Did the eighth graders not do any art projects?

On the contrary: the eighth grade teacher points to every classroom's doorframe, and as you survey the doors, you see half a dozen hand-made *mezuzot*. "They even penned the scrolls inside," she tells you, beaming with pride. And they'll be there until next year, when the upcoming class's *mezuzot* will go up and this year's class will be able to take theirs home.

Jewish art education is so often relegated to one-hour craft projects, an activity used as a vehicle for cementing in a single concept or vocabulary word, or as a "*chug*<sup>1</sup>" activity which simply gives the regular teacher a break while the art specialist takes over. The teacher gives instructions and hurries the kids through the steps so they can finish before the carpool line; some students finish quickly and goof off the rest of the hour, while the few who really delve into the process are cut short and told they can always finish coloring at home. But what if the time spent throughout a quarter, semester, or even year with the art teacher were cumulative instead of a string of one-off easy projects?

The artistic process is rarely seen as an end in and of itself. Jewish educators can easily see that Talmudic debate, for instance, is an end to itself, with the conclusions far less important

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<sup>1</sup> *Chug* (pronounced hoog) means "club" in Hebrew and is often used in camp settings to refer to elective informal-education activities such as art, Hebrew, or music.

than the process. For Jewish art education to be meaningful, we must begin to take the same approach in the artistic realm.

Such an approach is no easy feat. True Jewish art education delves deeply into both the “Jewish” and the “art” aspects, and staffing poses a significant hurdle. It is difficult, even in large communities, to find people who are well-trained in all three key areas: art, Judaism, and education. However, even with less-than-ideal staffing, meaningful Jewish art education is possible and perhaps even essential to a well-rounded Jewish education.

The key is to provide students a chance to embark on a long-term art project. If you have the luxury of hiring a new staff person, seek a teacher who is a practicing artist him or herself; it’s easier to work with an artist and provide him or her with Jewish educational resources to apply to the art than to take a Jewishly literate teacher and try to coach them in artistic skills. However, with or without any staff changes, integrating a long-term art project can take several forms. The easiest transition for schools with a “*chug*”-style art teacher would simply be to work on projects that span several sessions. Within larger schools, day schools, or post-B’nai Mitzvah classes at even a smaller congregation, it may be possible to offer a course entirely focused on some form of art and Judaism, with the objectives being balanced between Jewish learning and art. Even art history deepens the cognitive spaces which Judaism can enter for students who are less inclined to make art themselves. Or, finally, meaningful Jewish art education can be integrated into the regular classroom via Project-Based Learning (PBL), an approach which is flexible enough to work within both the congregational and the day school settings.

Many schools are cutting back on their arts programs, but the research shows that art education, especially within Jewish education, is not a luxury. As early as 1978, Richard Neuman wrote on the necessity of the arts within Jewish education: “Living Jewishly embraces

both the intellectual factor... as well as the emotional factor,” and part of our role as educators is to help our students find “the joy of Jewish living” (p. 44). The arts tap into parts of the brain which strictly cognitive instruction cannot, serving as “an essential element in the confluence of the emotional and intellectual areas” (p. 45), expanding the cognitive processes which students can achieve and apply to Jewish life. Ofra Backenroth’s work with the Blossom School, a Jewish day school focused on an integrated curriculum with heavy emphasis on the arts, demonstrated that students build personal connections to the subject matter through art via the obvious visual and kinetic modalities, and even the cognitive plays a significant role in the preparation steps before pencil touches the paper or clay hits the wheel (2004). The arts also provide a platform for expanding a school’s “hidden curriculum” on issues such as “self-expressiveness, creativity, spirituality, feminism, Jewish values and ethics, to name only a few” (p. 58). Not every school can restructure itself to integrate the arts as deeply as the Blossom School has, but Helena Miller of the Centre for Jewish Education has already developed a framework which almost any teacher could integrate into his or her classroom called “Visual Reflective Learning,” and in feedback from her action research using the framework, teachers found the process “simple and easy to teach” while students found the lessons “interesting and fun” and demonstrated, through their reflections, “a sophisticated understanding of the concepts” motivating the lesson (1999, p. 73). Miller’s framework is intended for single lessons rather than long-term projects, but it could easily be modified for usage with a PBL approach, in which students, either individually or in groups, conduct an investigation into the material and produce a project over the course of several weeks or even months, and the project is “realistic,” meaning applicable to life outside of

school (Thomas 2011, p. 3-4) – such as a mezuzah which they can then place on their own doorframe or a sukkah kit which embraces the idea of *hiddur mitzvah*<sup>2</sup>.

Integrating the arts into Jewish education in a meaningful way is no small task, but neither is it an impossible one. It requires a joint effort on the part of administrators and teachers. Administrators ought to seek well-rounded teachers with experience in Jewish education who are, ideally, practicing artists themselves. They must also commit to providing professional development opportunities for teachers to delve into both Jewish and artistic learning, whether through Miller’s Visual Reflective Learning framework, Project-Based Learning, or any other method, which the teachers must commit to attending. Teachers must get away from the one-shot crafts and begin to trust their students to develop a full project and be committed to seeing the project through during the course of the semester or year. Art, as with Jewish living, is a process, not a final product. We must begin to demonstrate this emphasis on the process in our schools or Jewish art education will continue to be relegated to the *tchotchkes* that no one remembers once they end up in the trash. Jewish learning isn’t something to be thrown away – and neither should the art which brings about that learning.

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<sup>2</sup> *Hiddur Mitzvah* is the Hebrew term for the principle of enhancing a *mitzvah*/commandment through aesthetics.