



ART IN OUR SCHOOLS: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE JEWISH PERSONALITY

by **Shoshana Golin, M.F.A.**

In November of 2003, ATID (Academy for Torah Initiatives and Directions), with the co-sponsorship of the Yeshiva University Museum, hosted a conference entitled, "Creative Spirituality: Jewish Education and the Arts," at the Center for Jewish History in New York City. The goal of the conference was to launch what we hoped would become an ongoing dialogue, which it is indeed proving to be, concerning the role that the visual arts can play in Jewish day school education. As the coordinator of the conference, I had the opportunity to meet and speak with individuals--artists, curators, and day school teachers and administrators--about what the arts can do and have done for day school students. The conference program that evolved in response to these conversations shed light on what is, in many cases, the untapped potential of the arts in our schools. Thus, the ideas presented in this article are not my ideas alone but rather the collected knowledge of experienced professionals with a serious mission--to improve the quality of the *h'inukh* our children receive.

Introduction

What comes to mind when one thinks of how art currently functions in the day school?

- 1 The art class is grudgingly given, at the expense of precious time for academic disciplines, to fulfill state requirements for art.
- 2 Art functions as a fun class, a "release" from the daily school routine that requires students to sit still at a desk for hours on end.
- 3 It is a chance for students who are weak academically to "find themselves" and build their confidence, and perhaps discover that they can excel in other areas.
- 4 Schools use art for public relations purposes, enhancing the aesthetic quality of the school by decorating walls of classrooms and halls, and enhancing school productions.

The applicability of these observations will vary from school to school but they fail to reveal one thing--the role that arts education can have in actualizing the goal of *h'inukh*, to develop within children the foundations for *ahavat Hashem*, *ahavat Torah* and *middot* that reflect the values of an observant Jew.

Establishing Shared Goals in Jewish Education

The goal within Jewish education, which we hope is the focus of every classroom, is not simply the transmission of information related to a particular discipline, be it *Tanack*, *Gemara*, Earth Science or Literature, but rather the development of individuals who will be equipped to leave our schools and lead a life that is committed to Torah and community. To hope for less from the art teacher is condescension. To imagine that an art classroom in which children make spice boxes and *seder* plates is the full extent of its ability to participate in the *h'inukh* process is to undervalue the contribution art can make in the education process.

The question then becomes, what can the arts provide our students beyond that which we have

Shoshana Golin is Assistant Professor of Fine Arts at St. John's University in New York. She is the American Director of Art Initiatives and was Conference Coordinator for ATID's "Creative Spirituality: Jewish Education and the Arts".

© 2005 by ATID (www.atid.org).

come to expect? For the answer to this question we must turn to the artists and art teachers who work with our children and we must learn from their observations and experiences. Interestingly enough, the goals and objectives these educators set for themselves are not only the natural domain of creative individuals, they speak directly to the objectives, values and concerns of Jewish education. What follows are just some of these crossover objectives.

Art and the Development of the Jewish Personality

In most conventional classrooms, students are seated in rows that are oriented in the direction of the teacher. Lessons require them to assimilate information that has been presented in a manner that places primary emphasis on knowledge acquisition, linear thinking and linguistic skills. The first challenge that faces many art teachers is to help their students learn a new way of focusing, learning and thinking.

Art and Prayer: Students tend to come into the art room from the hectic halls of the schools buzzing with the expectation that here they can walk, talk and blissfully stop thinking, when in fact nothing can be further from the truth. Art teachers help their students create an environment in which they can slow down from the rushed pace of school demands and after-school activities, while becoming aware, alert and active thinkers. Students in an art class must be participants, not observers. The creative process requires that the mind be both quiet, free from extraneous thoughts, and actively engaged--a state that many artists say is akin to that required in the prayer process.

A point that is sometimes missed in the education process is the relationship between knowledge acquisition on one side and knowledge application followed by self-evaluation on the other. As we know, the use of learned information transfers it from the realm of the distant and disinteresting to the realm of the vital and important.

The Process of Creative Solutions: In art there is information that needs to be learned and mastered--e.g. the many aspects of color theory--but the mastery of rules is academic if they fail to find realization in the real world act of creation. In an art class the teacher presents projects, or problems, that students need to solve using the knowledge they have acquired. It is then up to the student to develop interesting and dynamic artwork that is not only a "solution" to the teacher's project but reflects an idea, feeling or thought the student wishes to convey.

Students are often flustered but excited that there is no one solution, no one correct answer, and that the answer is not preexisting but must rather be discovered over time. Many students are concerned with the end result--what does the end product look like, what grade will they get--and are impatient to finish. In the art room they learn to be concerned with the development of ideas over time as they work towards solutions in both the process and the final product.

Self-Evaluation and *Middot* Development: In the creative process, students are constantly re-evaluating their work and it becomes the role of the teacher to guide them towards the students' self-appointed goals. Evaluation requires critique and it is at this point that the teacher often asks the student: Are you pleased with your work? In what way can the work be better? What does the piece need to be its best? Often students are afraid to criticize their own work (for many, criticism implies failure or weakness) but in the art room they learn that in self-critique lies the answer to self improvement. Self-critique resulting in a need to rework a work of art is part of the give and take of the creative process, a constant evaluation and evolution, that is mirrored in teaching students to self evaluate and change. It is this self-awareness that is crucial in the development of *middot* and is paralleled in the *viduy* process.

Respecting Others for Their Differences: A crucial part of any art class is the chance that students have to see each other's work. Although all the students begin with the same goals and objectives, the number of solutions that result are as many, if not more, than the number of students in the class. They learn to appreciate that they are one individual among many.

Learning from Others: In what is referred to as the class critique, students have the opportunity to hear their peers evaluate their work. In learning to critique each other's work, students develop a way of speaking with others in a manner that is helpful but not hurtful. For some students the class critique, hearing and receiving as well as giving criticism, can be a frightening experience. What they soon realize is that, in the safe environment of the classroom studio, critique is the result of the care and respect of their peers and is not meant as an attack on one's self esteem. In addition, students discover how others perceive their work and learn from each other's strengths and weaknesses.

Conclusion

These are only a few of the many contributions the art class can make to the *hinukh* process. However, environmental changes need to be instituted in our schools in order to best serve these objectives.

- 1 Firstly, there needs to be agreement between administrators, teachers and parents as to what the goals of Jewish education are and that the arts should be part of the process of working toward those goals.
- 2 The art teacher should be included with all other teachers in curriculum development. Many art teachers operate on the periphery of their schools. The art teacher should function as a crucial member of the larger educational community of the school. This will allow for not only curriculum integration but the meeting of larger educational goals as well.
- 3 The arts need to be respected as a discipline. This requires that the bar be raised for art education in our schools. Time and resources need to be dedicated to the art class, and teachers must be trained and respected.

Stated above is only one aspect of what the visual arts can provide our schools and students. Further discourse can address additional topics relating to the visual arts, such as integrating art into the Jewish studies curriculum, helping students develop a close relationship with Hashem through the creative process, and an appreciation of the Godly aesthetic. This is only the beginning of a broader discussion ATID has encouraged by understanding the potential of art education in developing the Jewish personality.