

Social and Emotional Learning in the Jewish Classroom: Tools for a Strong Jewish Identity

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## Abstract

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) promotes growth in areas related to ones ability to successful navigate the complex social and emotional tasks involved in developing a strong and healthy identity. In this paper, we discuss the relevance of SEL to the field of Jewish education. In particular, SEL is discussed as a way of operationalizing the skills needed for solid Jewish values. The discussion is illustrated with the example of a specific SEL program.

# Social and Emotional Learning in the Jewish Classroom: Tools for a Strong Jewish Identity

## Introduction

The pressure is mounting for Jewish educators and Jewish schools to deliver more than they have been asked before. Not only are there heightened expectations for outcomes related to Jewish knowledge (What is this week's Torah portion about? Who was the first Prime Minister of Israel?) and Hebrew language (with the all important trial-by-fire, the Bar Mitzvah), it is also essential to forge strong positive emotional ties to Judaism, to create a desire to maintain Jewish continuity, and steep students in "*menschlichkeit*". Synagogue-based religious schools are expected to do this in 4 - 6 hours per week. Day schools are expected to do all this, plus meet the rigorous academic and extra-curricular standards that will prepare students for college and beyond. On the one hand, we can see that these expectations are, at best, daunting. On the other, we express dismay and outrage when our schools do not live up to our expectations, and when reports indicate that many students look back on their Jewish education as a negative experience (Yares, Kress, & Elias, in press).

Alongside the increased pressure on Jewish schools lay societal forces that concern educators as Jews as well as Americans. Youth growing up in America today are bombarded with images of violence and disrespect. Information technologies present images of alternative lifestyles, even diverse forms of Jewish observance. The degree of exposure to information unfiltered by adult care givers is unprecedented in human history (O'Neil, 1997). Time spent taking part in these technological advances comes at the expense of reduced time and opportunities for forging meaningful interpersonal relationships. Paradoxically, our well-connected students are at risk of isolation, alienation, and poor social relationships. We see that youth in America and Canada are alienated from their schools and peers to the point of extreme violence, or threats of violence. Levels of

disrespect among youth, as well as their status on 42 indicators of well-being, are at troubling levels (Goleman, 1995). We face the persisting issues of students failing to reach their potential and inadequately developing the personal resources needed to handle the challenges of adulthood, family, work, and citizenship.

Jewish youth are not shielded from these societal forces – they come to school with the same emotional and social issues as their peers. Moreover, Jewish educators see as a major goal of Jewish education the fostering of “*menschlichkeit*” in their students. This major Jewish value – that of being a “*mensch*” – has been one of the few constants among the shifting landscape of American Jewry. But how to achieve this has been less successfully defined. As we envision the type of student we would like to “emerge” from our Jewish educational efforts, our image goes far beyond simply the absence of the negative societal impacts described above. We picture young adults who are caring about their families, their co-workers, and those in their communities, committed to *tikkun olam* and other Jewish communal causes, passionate, knowledgeable both in a Jewish and secular context, respectful of themselves and others, and able to solve problems in a peaceful, constructive manner. We would like our students to take with them fond memories of their time in Jewish schools, and feel an attachment to Judaism and Jewish education.

Further, we want Jewish schools to build “Jewish identity,” and to contribute to the spiritual development of Jewish children. These goals, too, have social and emotional aspects. Jewish students are developing memories - for better or for worse - regarding Jewish learning and Jewish practice that will impact on their decisions down the road. Students have the opportunity to develop strong Jewish peer networks, which can help foster a positive Jewish self-image. We must recognize the inter-relatedness of the various “identities” our students may have: Jewish identity, identity as a son/daughter, academic and social identities, etc. Our attempts to foster “Jewish identity,” especially with adolescents, must be understood in terms of the greater search for self-identity and self-expression being

undertaken by the student (Elias & Kress, 1999).

The intense impact of emotional and social experiences on identity in general and Jewish identity specifically is supported by recent research into how the brain works (Sylwester, 1995) and by everyday commonsense observations. Our memories and beliefs are supported by the emotional and social experiences which accompany their creation. What is of particular relevance to Jewish educators is the centrality of social and emotional skills in developing a sense of Jewishness. Writing about promoting spiritual growth in public schools, Charles Suhor suggests that teachers can set the stage by providing “person-to-person contact”, “close communication”, and “cognitive introspection and metacognitive understanding” (Suhor, 1998/1999, p. 14). Rabbi Harold Kushner, responding to the issue of how public schools can address spiritual growth in children, points out the importance of a climate of cooperation and mutual respect (Scherer, 1998/1999). Rachael Kessler, who has done pioneering work in showing the linkages between social and emotional issues and spirituality, notes, “Any program that helps students discover and express their feelings, values, dreams, and concerns in an atmosphere of respect and caring from their teachers and peers is nourishing spiritual growth in children and youth.” (Kessler, 1997, p. 13). Karen Stein (1999) has discussed the need for those working with adolescents around issues of prayer and spirituality to create environments in which adolescents are comfortable with the ongoing introspection involved in *kavanah*. She also identifies the importance of relating prayer to the teen’s personal life experiences. Stein discusses the role of informal Jewish education, particularly informal summer experiences. These potentially powerful influences create positive social and emotional climates for Jewish spiritual growth. She describes a scene of participants on a summer trip praying on the edge of the Grand Canyon, and the power of that experience. Clearly, the spiritual, the social and the emotional are interlinked.

Too often, though, these issues and goals get lost in the pressures for “academics” and preparation for college. We see this as a false dichotomy; it is futile to work toward the

cultivation of academic, “intellectual” skills without attending to the social and emotional development of Jewish students. A student who is admitted to a competitive university, but lacks internal motivation and goal-setting, may not be able to sustain academic achievement in the less-structured environment that is true of most colleges. Perhaps of equal or greater importance, such a student may also have difficulty sustaining Jewish identity and practices.

The relevance and historical precedent of moral education to Jewish educators has been clearly demonstrated (Ingall, 1999). In this paper, we share our experiences in the field of social and emotional learning (SEL). While this has been drawn primarily from work in secular educational settings, we will show relevance to Jewish education and will share work that has been done by innovators in the field of Jewish SEL. SEL stresses a) an understanding of the need to add a social and emotional understanding to the “content” of our moral teachings; b) a research - validated skills - based approach to building the inter- and intra-personal skills that form the basis of *menschlichkeit* and spiritual growth; and c) guidelines for program implementation based on years of experience in multiple settings. It has been our experience that SEL can be an organizing principle for the various goals of Jewish education as described above, and that social and emotional skills underlie not only successful inter- and intra-personal functioning, but also sound academic skills.

#### Social and Emotional Learning (SEL): Key Principles

Social and Emotional Learning, as articulated by Elias and colleagues (1997) is an approach to education that is designed to strengthen a person's ability to understand, manage, and express the social and emotional aspects of life in ways that enable the successful management of life tasks such as learning, forming relationships, solving everyday problems, adapting to the complex demands of growth and development, and forging an adult identity. SEL can be seen as an application of the theory of emotional intelligence as articulated by Salovey and Mayer (1990), Goleman (1995) and others. A wealth of psychological and educational research converges to suggest that social and

emotional skills can be learned by students in classroom settings in ways that will enable them to put these skills to use in real-life situations. However, teaching these skills requires a structured approach, and cannot be left to good intentions, good advice from teachers to students, or good luck.

Guidelines for the promotion of SEL (Elias Zins, Weissberg, and Associates, 1997) have been published and circulated to over 125,000 educational leaders by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. According to the authors, a comprehensive approach to addressing SEL is one which stresses the following areas (Elias Zins, Weissberg, and Associates, 1997), which we have reframed as “The Four Questions of SEL Programming”:

1. To what extent does the curriculum to which our children are exposed include the skills and competencies of *menschlichkeit* (e.g., empathy, self-control, listening, communicating, problem-solving)?
2. How are we instructing students about healthy lifestyles and avoidance of problem behaviors such as addictions, violence, *lashon hara*, and *sinat chinam* (senseless hatred)?
3. Are we helping students cope with transitions and crises, to develop the ability to access resources, both internal and external supports, during times of stress (e.g., divorce of parents, high school and college applications and transitions)?
4. To what extent do we provide opportunities for meaningful and ongoing *tikkun olam* and *gemilut chasadim*, the chance to develop a sense of meaningfulness and purpose through service in the community?

SEL programs should focus on the skills needed for social and emotional competence, which are quite close to what in the Jewish tradition is referred to as *menschlichkeit*, and are

often included, at least conceptually, in lessons on *derekh eretz* and *mussar*. These should be taught through direct instruction and reinforced throughout the day. This often runs contrary to misconceptions we hold regarding the acquisition of these skills.

Too often we expect that social and emotional skills will be “learned by osmosis,” “picked up along the way,” or are “just something you know”. Worse, some consider this to be a matter of inborn character. We would hardly say such a thing about grammar, math, Hebrew language, or any other part of the curriculum. SEL skills can be taught, learned, and improved, even among children who are suffering from conditions such as Autism, Asperger’s Syndrome, and ADHD.

A related tendency is to equate “telling students about” SEL with “teaching” SEL skills. We often, for example, tell our students to “be respectful”. We may even read a story from *Tanach* about respect. But respect can be a vague concept. Do we help operationalize for students how to speak respectfully, for example? What is or is not a respectful tone of voice or body posture? Do students have a chance to practice this and get feedback on their efforts? Our intentions at teaching social and emotional skills often outweigh our efforts. The time pressures and packed curricula faced by teachers reinforce this “teach and move on” approach to SEL. However, students must be able to demonstrate their ability to perform these skills before we can assume that the skills are attained. If they cannot demonstrate these skills, we must keep working on a few distinct skills until their use becomes routine.

A further misconception is that these skills can be promoted through a “magic bullet” approach to SEL - relying on brief interventions, often delivered by non-classroom personnel - to teach social and emotional skills. While assemblies, *mitzvah* art projects, “*midah* of the month” and the like have their place, they must be part of a school-wide approach which begins in the classroom. Indeed, successful programs are integrated into the general academic curriculum, and should be seen as going hand in hand with curricular

content areas (Norris & Kress, 2000). Applications of SEL skills can be found throughout the Jewish and General Studies curricula. Teachers can begin to prompt for these skills in real-life situations as they occur. Establishing a common language for social and emotional skills allows these skills to be reinforced by various school personnel throughout the day, and facilitates the developmental attainment of skills as students progress through the grades. Successful efforts to build kids' SEL skills starts in the early elementary grades - or even pre-school - and lasts through high school. Having a common vocabulary and repertoire of skills allows for continuity and for building on previous social and emotional gains. The adage "The task is not yours to finish, but neither are you free to desist from it" (*Pirke Avot 11:21*) can thus be seen as relevant to the teaching of SEL skills. Programming for parents - teaching parents how to use, prompt, and reinforce these skills in the home - can be based on classroom efforts.

We find it helpful to think of learning social and emotional skills in the same way of learning how to play a sport or musical instrument. Complex behavioral goals are broken down into smaller parts, and clear expectations for social and emotional behavior should be established. Teachers should model these behaviors for their students. Students should have an opportunity to role play and practice these components and receive feedback from the teacher. It is best that such instruction and practice occur in a safe setting in the classroom. We do not learn best when we are highly stressed, yet we tend to pick just these time to teach about social and emotional skills. The familiar image of a very angry student being told by a teacher "Just count to 10!" illustrates this. The student is not at a point of readiness to learn techniques on how to calm down, and may even become more upset by being told to do so. We would not expect to teach people how to play basketball by putting them into the midst of a high-stakes competitive game. To illustrate these ideas, we will discuss a particular approach to SEL programming, the Social Decision Making/Social Problem Solving (SDM/SPS) program.

### The Social Decision Making/Social Problem Solving (SDM/SPS) Program

The Social Decision Making/Social Problem Solving (SDM/SPS) program was founded in 1979 through collaborative efforts among psychologists and educators from Rutgers University, the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, and school districts in New Jersey. Over the years, curriculum guides have been developed for the elementary (Elias & Clabby, 1989) and middle school grades (Elias, 1993 ; Elias & Tobias, 1996). A book written specifically for parents helps carry-over of school-based programming (Elias, Tobias, & Friedlander, 1999, 2000). The program is implemented in the classroom by teachers (or other staff) who are trained to deliver the program. The program has undergone extensive research (Bruene-Butler, Hampson, Elias, Clabby, & Schuyler, 1997) and has received commendation from the National Education Goals Panel and the Character Education Partnership. The general structure of the program is shown in Table 1. SDM/SPS can be broken down in to three “phases”: Readiness, Instruction, and Application.

Readiness Skills        The Readiness Skills cover the fundamental components of self-control and social awareness/group participation. This part of the curriculum got its name from the idea that these skills are essential building blocks, or needed tools, for proper decision making. Lacking self-control and social awareness, we are unlikely to engage in productive problem solving, and are subject to the “emotional hijacking” (Goleman 1995) which derails rational thought during high stress situations. Table 1 shows the skills covered in the Readiness phase.

A major focus of the Readiness Phase has to do with setting the stage for effective conflict management and fostering self-discipline and socially responsible behavior even in the face of situation that might tax such positive outcomes. To begin to address these issues, teachers introduce an interconnected set of skills in conflict resolution and anger management. In introducing this set of skills, a teacher may lead a discussion of the importance of being able to stay calm in stressful situations (e.g., by asking the students to share experiences where they had difficulty calming down and the consequences of that). The teacher may have students discuss situations when it is particularly difficult from them to stay calm (“Trigger Situations”), and internal “Feelings Fingerprints” that signal stress. “Keeping Calm” is broken down into component skills (see Table 2), which are demonstrated and practiced, with feedback given to the students as they practice. The teacher often has students role play use of the skill. Importantly, the term “Keep Calm” is established as a prompt and cue for the desired behavior. This behavioral shorthand can be used by the teacher and staff throughout the school, to call for the skill when needed. Students may be prompted to “Keep Calm” during difficult times such as transitions or before exams. Teachers can model use of Keep Calm during situations where they might be feeling particularly stressed. As students become adept at using Keep Calm, the teacher can ask students to share situations in which they used Keep Calm in class or at recess. Aides and other staff can prompt students to use the skill as needed.

Instructional Phase: Eight Decision Making Skills In the Instructional Phase of the curriculum, students are introduced to eight skills of decision making, as summarized in Table 1. The acronym FIG TESPAN can be used as a mnemonic to assist students in remembering the process. Notably, the first step focuses on feelings. Emotions are seen as important guides through the problem solving process. The eight decision making skills are taught directly and through the use of a guided “Facilitative Questioning” technique to help students move through the process.

*Facilitative Questioning.* A first step toward building decision making skills involves using questions to guide students through the process. The facilitator - a teacher, counselor, etc. - becomes the decision making “coach,” asking questions which provide not the solution to the problem, but a framework for making the decision. The power of questioning is summarized by Penninah Schram (1996) in an article in a special issue of the Jewish Education News on this topic: “Questions lead us to think about the topic, consciously pay attention to the problem (that is, to attend, in all our senses), explore options, create different levels of thinking, and open up the creative juices of the mind. In this way, the searched-out answers, arrived at through analysis, evaluation, criteria, application, and so on, stay longer in your memory for re-use at future times” (p. 31). Although writing specifically about the use of questions to analyze Jewish stories, the application to decision making and problem solving is clear. Questions create the context for students to move through the problem solving process. With practice, this becomes internalized and expressed through students’ ability to walk themselves through decisions.

Application Phase As stated previously, comprehensive programming involves infusion of SEL skills into all aspects of the educational experience. Application activities provide opportunities to practice new skills in academic and social situations. Once introduced, SDM/SPS skills can be applied to content areas. A teacher may use the terminology problem solving to analyze a situation in a story (What was the character feeling? What was the problem?), or to make a decision about how a student will present material from a research project. Students can be prompted to use SDM/SPS skills in “real-life” situations such as recess and lunch, and then this experience can be processed with them.

Finally, the SDM/SPS program, with its skill-based focus, can be seen as addressing the first of the “Four Questions of SEL” posed earlier. However, the program can also be used at different SEL levels, including promoting positive health-related outcomes (e.g., Elias & Kress, 1994), assisting in times of transition (e.g., Elias et al., 1986), and forming the basis of planning community action projects (e.g., Johnsen & Bruene-Butler, 1993).

#### A Curriculum Example: SEL meets *Parshat HaShavuah*

Our colleague Dr. Bruce Ettinger is Executive Director of the Children’s Institute in Livingston, NJ, a private school for students with special education classifications that draws from over 50 surrounding school districts. In this setting, he has used SEL as an organizing principle for ALL interventions. Dr. Ettinger also serves as a teacher and Guidance Counselor at the Bergen County (NJ) High School of Jewish Studies and in that capacity has developed the *Parshat HaShavuah* Problem Solving Diary (Table 3). This worksheet is based on the Problem Solving Diary of the Social Decision Making program (Elias & Clabby, 1989). As students learn and practice skills for self control (such as the “Keep Calm” skill described previously), assertive communication, and pro-social problem solving, keeping a Problem Diary allows them to track these skills “in action”.

The SDM Problem Solving Diary asks students to use the skills of SDM to examine a difficult situation they encountered - How did they feel? What was the problem? What else could they have done in the situation? The *Parshat HaShavuah* Problem Solving Diary allows students to apply their social problem solving skills to a story taken from a particular week's Torah portion. (Many portions will contain an interpersonal situation which can be used as a springboard for such a worksheet.) This tool - amendable for use in various grade levels - can be used in several ways. Students can complete the form individually and then share their thoughts, or they can work in groups to brainstorm different alternatives. Students can be divided into groups to fill out the Diary from the perspectives of different parties to a conflict (e.g., half the students take Jacob's perspective, half take Esau's) and then compare notes. The solutions that students generate can be acted out, providing an opportunity to practice appropriate social behavior. Of course, this sheet can be adapted for use in a variety of content areas (e.g., to examine problems faced by protagonists in Jewish literature, history, or current events). Students can turn their completed diaries into essays or plays.

The *Parshat HaShavuah* Problem Solving Diary provides an excellent example of a number of SEL principles. Problem solving skills that are learned through direct instruction - in this case, areas such as feelings and consequential thinking - are reinforced in the curriculum. This provides the groundwork for the transfer and generalization of these skills into real life situations. Interestingly, this worksheet can also help provide the curricular "bridge" so often sought to help integrate Jewish and general studies. SEL can become a common language that cuts across content areas. The ideas above can move from a lesson on *Parshat HaShavuah* and into, for example, writing (Hebrew or English), Jewish history, or current events, all under the rubric of SEL (Elias & Tobias, 1996).

## Getting Started

As you read through the description of SEL, you were probably struck at certain points with a thought that “Hey, we already do some of this at my school.” Indeed, very few schools do not already implement some type of SEL program. These programs may take different forms, and may be known by their aliases: character education, *midot* lessons, *mussar*, *derekh eretz*, conflict resolution, friendship units, support groups for children under stress (e.g., children of divorce). A good first step for an administrator would be take inventory of these efforts. When and where do they occur? Perhaps there is a “Character education” assembly for the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, or peer mediation in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Perhaps the 8<sup>th</sup> graders are required to do social service in the community. Now, picture this from the perspective of a student moving through these programs: Where are the “holes” in programming (e.g., at certain grade levels)? Are the programs coordinated with one another, or is each a “stand alone”? If the latter is the case, the students are getting fragmented instruction in SEL, and the school is wasting the opportunity to capitalize on its existing efforts. Our children need greater, rather than less, synergy in their learning.

Once an area is targeted, then efforts can be made to create programming, or coordinate existing efforts. We have found that it is helpful to start with a small pilot group. Having a multidisciplinary team (Jewish and General Studies teachers, specialists, administration, clinical staff, etc.) involved in initial implementation can assist in future program development because different “constituents” have input from the beginning. SEL principles should themselves be applied to beginning steps of implementation. This initial group must be able to devote time for training and ongoing curriculum development and support. This will take creative planning, and may require administrative assistance (e.g., for allowing teachers to use staff meeting time for planning sessions). As the process unfolds, existing guidelines, noted earlier (Elias et al, 1997), may be helpful to illuminate the paths that others have followed.

Just as students are learning new SEL skills, teachers are learning new SEL teaching techniques. Awkwardness, frustration, and resistance are to be expected and should be seen as legitimate feelings which indicate real concerns. These concerns and problems should be addressed in a respectful way. An administrator who is clearly “on board” - is part of the pilot team, attends trainings, models SEL skills, and uses the language of the SEL program to prompt for these skills - will help build staff motivation.

### Concluding Thoughts

Program implementation in Jewish educational settings involves unique challenges. In particular, time constraints are unavoidable. Religious Schools do not meet daily, and Day Schools are already balancing a packed curriculum. There is no denying that time is at a premium. However, we should recall that SEL can be infused into academic areas. Also, investments in building skills in self control and social awareness can result in recapturing instructional time in terms of improved classroom behavior. Further, as noted, teachers are probably already working on promoting SEL skills, and initial efforts could work on coordinating these rather than adding new responsibilities. Finally, if school-wide implementation is a goal, then the responsibility for implementation is spread out and does not fall on the shoulders of one or a small group of educators. Our children need many skills to grow up with a strong sense of Jewish identity. None are more fundamental than those that will help them exhibit *menshlehkeit* in their classrooms, schools, families, and communities.

Table 1

Basic Structure of the Social Decision Making Approach  
Readiness Skills

- A. Self-control skills:
  - 1. Listening carefully and accurately,
  - 2. Following directions,
  - 3. Calming themselves down when upset or under stress, and
  - 4. Approaching and talking to others in a socially appropriate manner.
- B. Social awareness and group participation skills:
  - 1. Recognizing and eliciting trust, help, and praise from others,
  - 2. Understanding others' perspectives,
  - 3. Choosing friends wisely,
  - 4. Participating appropriately in groups, and
  - 5. Giving and receiving help and criticism.
- C. Skills for decision-making and problem-solving:
  - 1. Noticing signs of feelings,
  - 2. Identifying issues or problems,
  - 3. Determining and selecting goals,
  - 4. Thinking of alternative solutions,
  - 5. Envisioning possible consequences,
  - 6. Selecting the best solution,
  - 7. Planning and making a final check for obstacles, and
  - 8. Noticing what happened and using the information for future decision-making and problem-solving .

Table 2: Readiness Skill Example: Keep Calm

Keep Calm

1. Tell Yourself to Stop
2. Tell Yourself to “Keep Calm”
3. Slow Down Your Breathing With Two Deep Breaths
4. Praise Yourself for a Job Well Done

(From Elias & Clabby, 1989)

Parshat HaShavuah Problem Solving Diary

Group Member's Names: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Parsha: \_\_\_\_\_ Verses: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Name the Torah characters that are experiencing a problem.
2. Describe the problem they encounter.
3. What are their feelings?
4. Describe the ways they solve their problem.
5. What was the outcome of their solutions?
6. Identify and describe other ways the problem could have been solved.
7. Describe what might have been the outcomes if these other solutions had been chosen.
8. Describe a similar problem which you personally encountered, observed, or heard about and the ways in which the solutions you identified could be successfully applied.

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