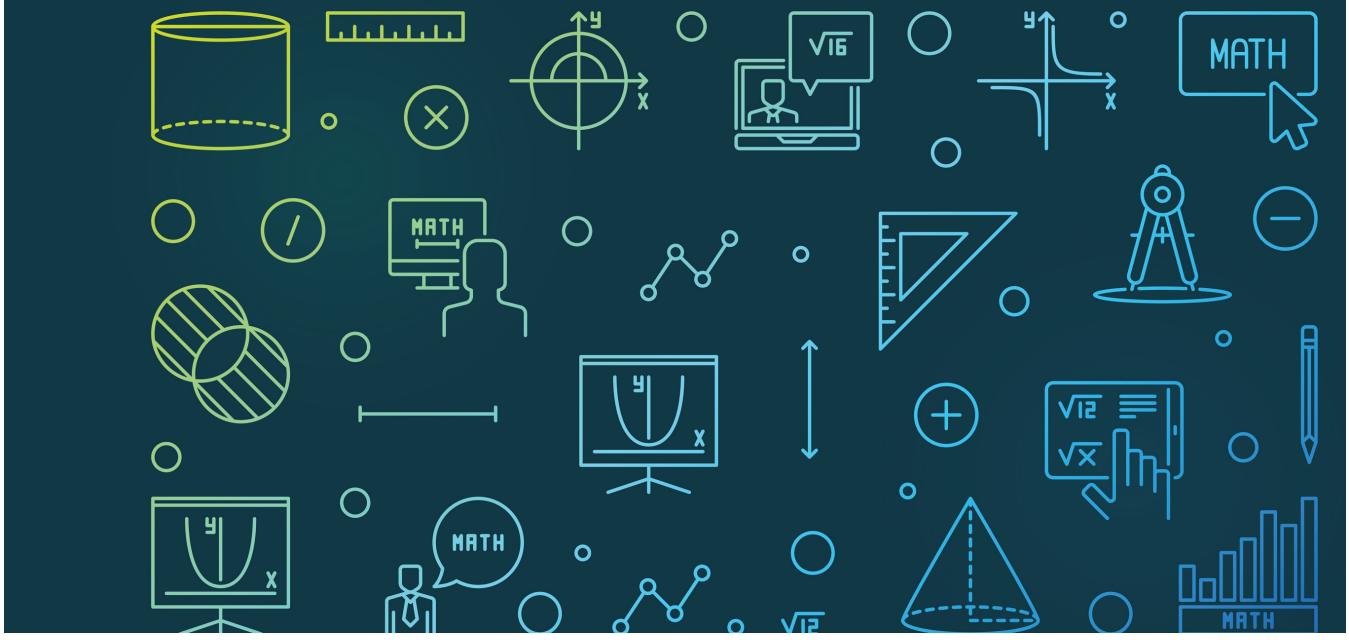
אגוד מוסדות לחינוך תורני
CONSORTIUM of JEWISH DAY SCHOOLS

Balancing Equations That Really Matter



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Sora Devora Chrysler

Several significant statements jolted me into heightened awareness in my early twenties, impacting profoundly on my view of human growth and development within Jewish education as well as on my own life and choices as a parent over many years.

In the introduction to *Chovos Halevavos:*

אך חכמת התורה מתחלקת לב' חלקים האחד מהם לדעת חובות האברים והיא החכמה הנראית והשני לדעת חובות הלבבות והם המצפונים והיא החכמה הצפונה

"The wisdom of the Torah can be divided into two parts: knowledge of 'the duties of the limbs', wisdom that is manifested externally, and knowledge of the 'duties of the heart', duties which belong to the hidden, private realm of the heart – the wisdom of the inner life."

Later in his introduction, the *Chovos Halevavos* continues:

וידעתי דעת ברורה כי חובות האברים לא תשלמנה כי אם ברצון הלב וחפץ הנפש לעשותם... לא היה נכון להניח נפשנו ולבנו שהם מבחר חלקי עצמנו שלא יחייבם בעבודתו כפי יכלתם מפני שבהם גמר העבודה ועל כן נתחייבנו בחובות גלויינו ומצפונינו כדי שתהיה עבודתנו שלמה וגמורה וכוללת מצפונינו וגלויינו לבורא יתברך

"It's clear to me that the duties of the limbs can only be performed properly with will of the heart and longing of the soul to do them... Without heart and soul which are our most noble parts, the service of G-d is incomplete. ***Therefore, we have been assigned both outer and inner duties so that our service is complete."***

Here, right in our own sources, in no uncertain terms, is the glaring truth that the inner world counts. What is current is the recognition that it needs serious attention, not only to ensure the full, healthy, wholesome, expression of Judaism and wellbeing, unleashing the blessings that come from this, but also to prevent Jewish psycho-spiritual catastrophe.

Spiritually speaking, it is very easy to slip into, live, or promote a Torah life that excludes the wholesome inner dimension and healthy connection with G-d. Psychologically speaking, every human being has a different flavor of mind and heart that needs understanding and addressing – both fundamentally and specifically. From my own life experience, I witnessed how much there has been to learn about myself in order to rise to the challenges of daily life, in spite of the solid foundations provided by a warm loving home and emotionally nurturing culture that *b"h* I was privileged to be raised in.

The Jewish challenge today is predominantly a psycho-spiritual one, where we require a solution to the following:

- Spiritual disconnection that has led to robotic and at times non-existent Judaism
- Diluted values from excess materialism and the secular worldview
- Lack of self-awareness and an increase in mental health issues

Where all cultures can benefit greatly from Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) that builds the human being, I venture to suggest that, based on the above, we incorporate TSEL – *Torah*-based SEL – for the Jewish child, across all sectors, thereby strengthening the individual, their *Yiddishkeit* and *Am Yisroel* collectively – from deep within. A TSEL model that can address all three areas in one formula is my focus.

First, though, let's understand how today's child differs from the child of yesterday; this informs the packaging and choices for the successful TSEL model of which I share examples in this article.

Chovos Hatalmidim (written by *Rav Kloni-*

...every human being has a different flavor of mind and heart that needs understanding and addressing – both fundamentally and specifically.

mus Kalman Shapira, the *Rebbe* of Piacenza, *Hy"d*) identifies the crucial difference between our generation and those that preceded us. He lived in the first half of the 20th century.

> מה החלוק בין דור לדור, למה בדורות הקדומים לנו כל חנוך שהוא היה מועיל, תלמידי כל מלמד ובני כל אב רבם ככלם היו עובדי ד', ולא כן עתה. הסבה הפשוטה והעקרית היא, שהנער קם וחושב את עצמו לאיש בטרם בא מועדו... לחשב את עצמו לאיש בדעת ורצון, בעוד בו דעת מהפך ורצון בסר ומר

"The primary most basic difference is that today's youth tend to view themselves as adults before their own time. They see themselves as fully mature in their opinions and desires when the truth is that their opinions and emotional reactions are shaky and their desires juvenile – a false independence."

He continues:

> שבשביל זה על כל מדריך מלמד ומחנך מביט הנער כעל עריץ זר, שבא למשל עליו ביד חזקה ולשלל ממנו שלטון עצמותו דעתו ורצונו, ומין התנגדות אף שנאה מתעוררת בקרב הנער פנימה אל מלמדיו ואביו, עד שאינו נותן לב לשמוע את דבריהם ואיך לקלטם בלבו, רק איך להתפטר מהם ולצאת מן ידיהם... והאם אפשר שמן הדעת שלו וההתרגשות והתפעלויות ארסיות, תתרקמנה שאיפות והשקפות לא פסולות ורעולות

"Every counselor and educator is viewed as an oppressor, which causes the child's heart to become blocked from hearing and internalizing messages, as the only thing that concerns him is how to free himself of them and how to escape their grasp. Exploring and evaluating the world like this – is there any way that such a process will not result in aspirations and worldviews that are spiritually (and morally) devastating?"

The influences in our current times, such as the overwhelming allure of *gashmius*, activities, and attractions that desensitize *neshamos,* and the loss of healthy boundaries and wholesome *mentschlichkeit* have greatly exacerbated this situation, beyond what was observed in the previous generations.

He suggests that "to address this self-centered independence and antagonism we must adjust ourselves to him and speak in a language that he can understand." How? The *Rebbe* of Piacenza states that "teaching based exclusively on intellect cannot last for today's child. We need to address their entire being." Holistic learning.

The *Ramchal* states, "Our duty in this world is to draw close to *HKB"H* and pass trials." The TSEL curriculum prepares students to meet these two goals:

1. Drawing Close to *Hashem*

This TSEL curriculum contains themes and skills that enable the child to connect with a being that is not visible to the senses. This requires an understanding of what relationships are, how they work, and what connection really is. The foundation of one's relationship with *Hashem* is dependent on where one holds in one's relationship with oneself. This model builds the necessary foundations of self-awareness and self-management that provide a springboard to other healthy and connected relationships, including the relationship with *Hashem.*

2. Passing Trials

How one navigates trials is very indicative of one's mental and emotional capacity and health. As an art therapist, I developed a system called *Emphasis Art* where the focus was on human growth and development via art, and I witnessed how children gave up very easily. When they were at step one, they were already panicking that their efforts were not reaping the results expected at the following steps. They seemed oblivious to the idea that goals are reached via a process and effort. Results were expected instantaneously.

We naturally struggle, make mistakes, and we often fail, yet we expect to reach our goals in an instant. Recognizing and engaging in trials requires a healthy relationship with an attitude towards struggle and an understanding of process – the journey to the goal, the journey to overcome. It also requires an understanding of why we may struggle and how to address struggles in a manner that embraces our whole selves. Children learn in our model what quick fix means, where it hails from within our environment, and how to address this.

Shifting paradigms about life is all part of TSEL, redefining what life is really all about. There is a feeling of *simcha* that comes through the recognition of and response to challenge and from learning that it is a normal and necessary part of life and not a shameful matter. This robust TSEL curriculum clarifies all the angles around challenge and how to rise to them.

Shifting Mindsets

Looking at the human growth landscape, the following five paradigm shifts further enhanced the shaping of this TSEL curriculum:

"...teaching based exclusively on intellect cannot last for today's child. We need to address their entire being."

1. **From blame to assuming responsibility:** There is a saying that those who succeed spend only five percent of their time and energy on the problem and 95 percent on the solution. We disempower and instill fear in our pupils and their parents by focusing on and ruminating on all the issues and problems. Our chosen TSEL fortifies, empowers, and prepares pupils for the right approach and action regardless of circumstances and global challenges.

   Imagine going to fight in a war against a ferocious enemy with one's general constantly stating how dangerous, powerful, and destructive the enemy is. Compare that to the general who says, "The enemies are powerful, but that is not our focus; our focus is on our strength, our skills, our responsibilities, *Hashem's* backing, He is by our side…"

2. **From imbalance to anchored stability:** A healthy, wholesome mensch is a balanced, stable, anchored individual. In Jewish psycho-spiritual terms, balance comes from building the three core relationships – the relationship with oneself, *Hashem,* and one's fellow man. We all know what happens when an individual focuses on only one of these relationships to the exclusion of the others.

3. **From self-centered and disconnected to other-centered and connected:** The *Nesivos Sholom* (written by Sholom Noach Berezovsky, the *Rebbe* of *Slonim, zt"l*) asks what these three relationships have in common that necessitates that education is taught according to all three? He answers that they each take the human being away from self-centredness. How relevant for a generation described as the 'self-absorbed - I generation'. Building the relationship with oneself via the *Torah,* connecting with *HKB"H* via *avoda,* the *mitzvos* and *gemilus chasadim,* whilst expressing love of one's fellow man—this three-pronged approach is ideal. This TSEL model highlights how *Yiddishkeit* and life are in fact all about relationships and how to engage in them wholesomely.

4. **From social issues to social skills:** Before piloting this model of TSEL, an educational psychologist carried out a pre-course sociogram. She asked the pupils three questions that, when analyzed digitally, revealed which students were ignored or neglected, which were popular, and who was the class king or queen, etc. After teaching the pupils the comprehensive TSEL lessons on their relationship with themselves alone, without instruction on a single social skill, the post-course sociogram revealed substantial improvements in reciprocal relationships (68.3 percent) and class cohesion (76.3 percent). This highlights that the foundations of all three relationships are built on a robust model of the relationship with oneself.

5. **From diluted values to strongly embedded values:** This TSEL curriculum distinctly outlines psycho-spiritual values to be consolidated as it targets all three current issues in one go. When asking pupils who were taught this curriculum, "Which is your best value?" one student answered, "The value of ***gavra v'cheftza, people before objects,*** because it made me feel very special, and now when I am absorbed in reading, when my mother walks into the room I stop for a moment to greet her." Another student loved the value ***mahalich, process,*** because "I don't fear doing things anymore like exams; as long as I carry out a process, I am further today than I was yesterday and will be further tomorrow." Bear in mind these are elementary-aged children, as this model targets children well before their challenging teen years.

6. **From a hospital model to a self-awareness/empowerment model:** In the town of Chelm there was a bridge. It was broken. People either fell and hurt themselves or felt unstable and insecure crossing it. The leaders of the town decided to address this huge challenge and built hospitals on either side of the bridge. Came along a wise man who said, "Let's rebuild/fix the bridge itself." Hospitals will always be necessary, but they need not be the norm. They can also be very expensive. Prevention is exponentially more effective and cost-effective than cure. Aside from all the points covered so far in building psycho-spiritual health, it makes financial sense.

Fixing the bridge requires shifting the mentality from a hospital one to a self-empowerment one. This allows human beings to develop a strong self-awareness where they can assume responsibility for their own growth, wellbeing, and challenges on the one hand, and where we encourage individuals to feel really confident to go for guidance and insight where necessary and helpful on the other. The bridge of sound mentality requires educators to approach human growth and development from a preventative angle and regard it as empowerment – not only a cure.

There is a feeling of* simcha *that comes through the recognition of and response to challenge and from learning that it is a normal and necessary part of life and not a shameful matter.

Impact

Children spend almost two decades in full-time education that is being constantly tweaked and improved, whilst humanity deteriorates and issues increase, in spite of the incredible investment on the part of educators. Alongside all the good taking place, TSEL has made a remarkable difference. Excluding TSEL from the timetable of any child seems negligent for our times. Once included, the benefits are very evident.

An 8-year-old told me how he enjoyed these TSEL lessons as they were fun and helped him. Responding, "I am so happy for you. Can you imagine a mechanic who did not know how a car works or what to do when something goes wrong?" He replied with glee, "He can still learn how to be one," to which I replied, "Very clever! That is exactly what you are doing, you're learning how to be a human mechanic." We both shared how exciting this is.

Stimulating independent minds with insights and seeds of self-understanding with strong *Torah* values is a recipe for greatness. In a primary school in Manchester, the *Rebbe* shared with me how after these TSEL lessons, he was giving a class on *Chumash* when he walked past a table of boys talking about the *parsha* and overheard one pupil say, "Wow, can you imagine how *Yaakov* felt? He must have been so scared, but he really channelled his emotions into *tefilla*…" This is an example of how TSEL compliments Judaic studies and makes *Torah* so relevant.

One teacher in Westcliff shared how her pupil made a connection on her own between a TSEL process that helps a child to feel emotions, accept them, and change them, taking time in this process, to the *teshuva* process, in that we are to sense what we have done wrong, accept and admit, invest in changing, and take the time to do this.

I feel that giving adequate time to this subject enables the children to engage in dialogue about their psycho-spiritual selves in ways they would never think of if not prompted. In a lesson on the needs of the *neshama* and the *guf* and how they complement each other, one little girl asked, "I understand that my *guf* has needs, as I feel tired or hungry, but how do I tell when my *neshama* has a need?" This sparked an amazing discussion and learning experience.

One *Rebbe* asked his class to choose a meaningful goal whilst sharing how they would reach it based on all they had learned in these TSEL classes. The boy answered that he would like to be a much kinder sibling, sharing with the class, "My goal is to be a better sibling. I have carried out self-observation and planned the following processes to my goals… and this is what I will do to build against resistance and this is how I will deal with mistakes." Weeks later, the boy's brother asked the *Rebbe* what he was teaching his brother as he had become so much nicer. He told the *Rebbe,* "My brother said you are teaching him lessons on how to become special from something he called self obser-something or other?"

A *Rebbe* teaching this model to boys stated, "It nurtures a depth and appreciation of who they are, their sense of belonging to a nation, and the impact of their every activity, choice, and *mitzva.* This provides a foundation for their further growth and their progress beyond the confines of the classroom. I can honestly say that the distance and difference between a child who has experienced TSEL and one who has not is vast. It is life-changing."

One headmistress in London said, "It spills over into the other subjects, especially if the class teacher also teaches the TSEL. The TSEL forms the anchor of our school, it is the comfortable backdrop. Pupils have a heightened awareness that actions matter and that there is a way to shine brighter and not live robotically. It is the basics in our school. It is a given that this is necessary."

A headmaster in Manchester shared how exam results improved for the pupils learning this TSEL model in the same year and how it helped students develop self-efficacy so that when they learn other subjects such as *Chumash, Parsha, Gemarah, Mishnayos,* etc., it helps them to make accelerated progress.

One headmistress in London shared how attendance went from poor to perfect on Fridays as children did not want to miss the TSEL lessons. Family life improved, too. "My daughter used to be so insular, she now bonds with me and is happier."

Differences Between SEL and TSEL

The organization CASEL provides a superb framework for

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SEL that has similarities to TSEL, describing that it is a human development process through which people acquire and apply knowledge, skills and attitudes to develop five particular areas:

- Self-awareness – developing healthy identities
- Social Awareness
- Relationship skills – establishing and maintaining supportive relationships, where we feel and show empathy for others
- Self-management skills
- Responsible and caring decision making

Yet, SEL and the TSEL model differ fundamentally in approach in three ways:

1. Psychological vs spiritual: SEL tends to focus on different themes, such as conflict resolution or feelings. The TSEL model takes the entire being into account, starting from the core, their *neshama,* soul, and then their *guf,* body and its functioning on all levels – both the *penimius* and *chitzonius,* building G-d conscious, wholesome, ethical living. This approach builds such a heightened self-awareness that pro-social behavior manifests as a result, even before learning social skills. It teaches how inner faculties facilitate well-being, resilience, as well as spiritual and human connection. It produces an *ehrliche,* wholesome, happy *mensch* with self-esteem, where the wealth of self-knowledge and *middos* are defined by *Torah* standards that build character refinement and elevated/improved thoughts, emotions, behavior, and speech.

2. Information vs. formula for life: SEL teaches knowledge and skills whereas this robust TSEL curriculum presents a model/formula for life, not only how to live wholesomely and competently, but also teaching how to reflect and actively assume responsibility to grow spiritually throughout one's life with vitality in wellbeing as well as in *mitzvos.*

3. Secular vs. Torah-based: SEL is built from a secular and mainly psychological approach and links to global trends. This TSEL structure and educational approach has its roots in *emes* from the *Torah* and *Torah* scholars alongside it, nurturing consideration of *Hashem* and *Torah* values in decision-making.

Setting TSEL Up for Success

Congruency and consistency are key factors. It is important to ensure that the teacher responsible for this subject is warm and values psycho-spiritual growth. Children will recognize and resist a teacher who comes in unprepared and whose heart is not in the subject. They are also very sensitive to hypocrisy. It is the school's duty to choose teachers who are not drowning in their own pressures and other curricula prep and thus unable to adequately prepare. Educators of this model have shared how trying to cram information that should be taught over 45 minutes in 20 minutes or half an hour causes the children to disconnect and not have adequate integration time. It would be better to divide the material over two sessions within a week. A teacher of TSEL needs to also be open to the fact that part of authentic growth and growing is resistance. In the words of Rabbi Dr. Akiva Tatz, "A fish swimming with the current may be alive or dead, but a fish swimming against the current is for sure alive."

School culture: Of course, it makes a huge difference when the entire school culture is working towards the same TSEL objectives and values. One headmistress in London has adopted the ubiquitous approach. "One makes a mistake calling this particular curriculum a program; it is a culture of connection where the core values enable connection." To function truly ubiquitously, a school may even require a review of a recruitment policy in terms of the kind of teachers one will accept within one's school. From my experience, some teachers have not had the opportunity to develop themselves holistically, yet when given the opportunity, they rise to the challenge amazingly and grow with the pupils through the TSEL curriculum as TSEL material applies to all ages.

Parents: Feedback from schools shares how parents responded to this model. Parents are excited and happy that their children are learning this subject and are delighted to observe the improved changes in their children, home, and themselves. Those that want to know and learn more about

"A fish swimming with the current may be alive or dead, but a fish swimming against the current is for sure alive."

themselves are so excited to have the exposure through their children. As one mother shared, "My husband was not shown any love over his childhood. He uses this material sent home to bond with his children and learn what he never had the opportunity to learn."

There are those who, so burdened by life, are only too happy that their children are being taught this, but say, "Please! Leave me out of it." The parents who are struggling greatly in these areas carry much baggage and live disconnected themselves. The children of this kind of family are the ones who in particular receive the preventative angle. They include the exceedingly rare parent who may mock or criticize the initiative.

We all long for and delight in *Hashem's* blessings and Divine Providence in our lives. TSEL nurtures happiness and inner peace and teaches how to labor for both - ultimately opening channels to *brachas.* Our *Torah* sources validate this with the following words: There is no vessel for blessing like peace and *Hashem* likes to dwell where there is joy.

Having shared much of what can go into self-development, I end off with the following most amusing 'chitchat' with a little boy in elementary school. I asked, "Do you ever learn about yourself – about you, yourself?" He answered confidently, "Yes, I do…. that I must go to the dentist twice a year!" □

Some teachers have not had the opportunity to develop themselves holistically, yet when given the opportunity, they rise to the challenge amazingly and grow with the pupils through the TSEL curriculum...

Sara Devora Chrysler lives in Manchester, UK, where she carried out Emphasis Art over 20 years – her form of art therapy – across all sectors of Judaism in three institutions and privately. She is the designer of Treasure Hunt/Zuch Dem Oizar, a TSEL Curriculum for elementary schools as well as Yahadus Life lessons – linking Penimius/Inner Growth to the Yomim Tovim, used for both elementary and high schools. Contact 0044 161 7734500 or +447594429033 or at sdc@noamziv.org. See website noamziv.org.

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