

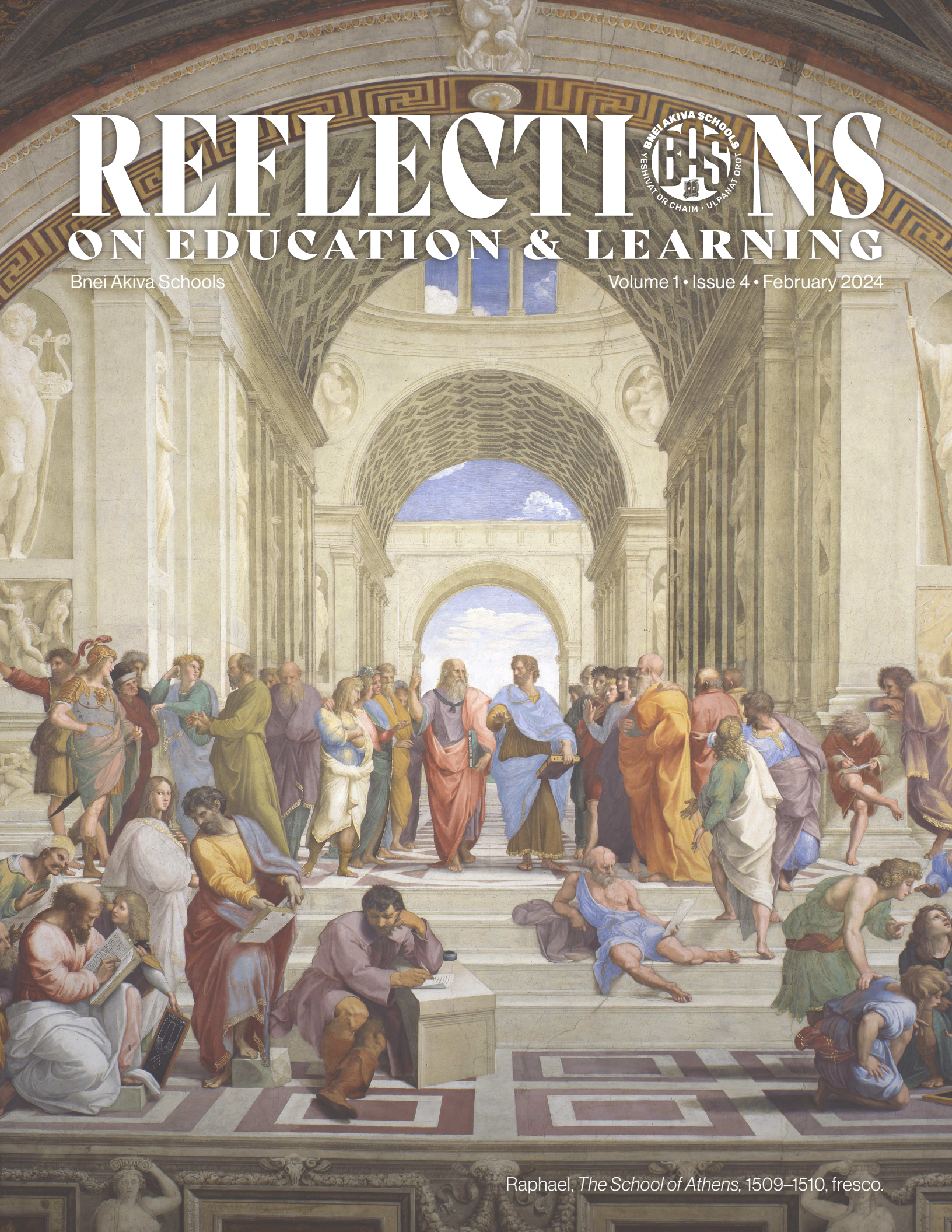
REFLECTIONS

ON EDUCATION & LEARNING



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Raphael, *The School of Athens*, 1509–1510, fresco.

THE CAT KILLED CURIOSITY

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION



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ONE OF THE THINGS I LOVE ABOUT teaching Media Arts at Bnei Akiva Schools is having the opportunity to get to know the students on a deeper level than any other academic subject might allow. Through the art projects I assign, I have the opportunity to learn about the students' hobbies, the music they listen to, their favourite books and movies, and much more. In fact, all of the major creative assignments in the course are designed to get the students to tell the world something about themselves—take, for example, our recent monogram logo project. Students used their initials to create a recognizable object or theme that was connected to their name or personality. For instance, one student represented the letters O and K as a paintbrush and palette to symbolize her love of art. It was meant to

be an enjoyable yet reasonably challenging task—but as we approached the end of the designated work periods for the project, I had a troubling interaction with a student.

The student solicited my opinion on her artwork, as many students do. However, outside of technical recommendations or referring back to design principles that we learned in class, I have tried to avoid giving my personal opinion. Instead, I asked the student if she liked her artwork. She responded by asking if it would receive a good mark. I asked her if she felt the logo represented her as a person—if so, then she had met the requirements of the project assignment. What's more, she had created something to express herself, the entire point of the Ontario Arts Curriculum, which notes that “through participation in the arts, students can

develop their creativity, learn about their own identity, and develop self-awareness, self-confidence, and a sense of well-being” (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 3). The student countered, to my dismay, “But it’s the mark that’s important!”

I do not think this is an uncommon occurrence. A high school teacher of mine used to tell my class regularly, “You are not a grade on a piece of paper,” yet our students seem to think that they are. They go to school to get good marks, which they believe will lead them to highly competitive university programs, which will in turn lead them to high-paying jobs. The entire situation echoes what Neil Postman, renowned educator and media theorist, discusses in his book *The End of Education* (1995). While considering the necessity of “gods” (p. 4) in education—values and ideals that shape the *what* and *why* of teaching—Postman mentions several “gods” that are prominent, if ineffective, in our contemporary times. One in particular pops up fairly regularly as an educator: “the god of Economic Utility,” which promises that “if you will pay attention in school, and do your homework, and score well on tests ... you will be rewarded with a well-paying job” (27). Accordingly, at the back of the classroom sit two or three students who delight in piping up, “But when will we actually *use* this in our daily lives?” in response to practically any lesson that does not explicitly cover how to do your taxes or write an email.

Tyler Austin Harper, an assistant professor at Bates College, notes the same mentality affecting the universities themselves. In a recent article in *The Atlantic* about the decline

of the humanities, Harper writes: “In a brave new world where every major must prove its worth to its debt-saddled ‘student-customers,’ the humanities have a hard time mounting a credible case that their disciplines catapult graduates into six-figure salaries” (2023). And while most courses in high school are not as abstract and probably more directly profitable than Philosophy 101, the problem remains that an eventual payout some years down the line is a nebulous concept and a poor motivator.

Instead, what if we made the purpose of getting an education not economic gain, but the education itself? In this model, the value of going to school would be the active pursuit of knowledge and the accompanying methodology that is required. That is precisely what is outlined in the second component of Bnei Akiva Schools’ mission statement: “To offer a dual curriculum of Jewish and General Studies that will arm our students with the methodological tools needed to become self-reliant in classical Jewish texts and give them a broad-based secular grounding in the classical world disciplines.” We should educate not as a means to a goal, but to create lifelong learners. We

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should provide an education to build curiosity, for students to learn how to think, how to write, how to explore, and *how to learn on their own*. This is a central Jewish value. Learning the Torah is supposed to be a constant endeavour, independent of institutions. Pirkei Avot relates: “Turn [the Torah] over, and [again] turn it over ... And look into it; And become gray and old therein; And do not move away from it, for you have no better portion than it” (5:22).

Our purpose, then, as a school, should be encouraging the students to actualize this. Jonathan Parker, in the initial issue of this publication, mentions that our contemporary models of education, “Sage on the Stage” or “Guide on the Side,” inherently deny the students some or all autonomy over their learning direction (2023, p. 2). And while, as Parker notes, activities like Group-Level Understanding allow for a more open conversation between staff and students, faculty and administration, I would go one step further: What results would we get if we gave students complete control over their learning? What if the mark of our success as educators was not the grades our students receive, but the curiosity they show about topics they choose, the questions they ask, the independent research they conduct?

As an Ulpana graduate myself, the biggest impact this school had on my life was my Modern Middle East teacher who encouraged just that. What started off as a one-time book recommendation at the end of a class led to another, which led to me exploring the Israel and Middle East shelves at my local library, which led to books about politics and philosophy and hiking and rock music and so much more. “One good deed brings around another good deed,” says Pirkei Avot (4:2), and one good book brings on another. And another. And another.

My takeaway from that class was not necessarily the history of the Middle East—although I certainly walked away with that—but rather the endless topics that *I didn't know about* and were now open for me to discover if I just looked for them.

A student's growing curiosity might not seem like much if we measure learning by marks and numbers. But if the goal of learning is more learning—if our purpose as educators is to encourage curiosity and personality—I think we'd do pretty well indeed. ■

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