



# Jewish Day Schools as Incubators of *Kavannah*

by LILLIAN HELLMAN, DIRECTOR OF MIZEL

Dr. Saul P. Wachs, Professor of Education and Liturgy and Chair of the Education Department at Gratz College explains that, “*Kavannah* can be defined as prayer that is meaningful, significant and purposeful. *Kavannah* is often the subject of intensive discussion in the context of prayer, specifically, formal worship. There is a tension between the value of praying with *kavannah* and the value of *keva*. *Keva* refers to that which is fixed in prayer... the elements that are mandated by *Halakhah* (Jewish law) or *Minhag* (local custom). The Jewish service is predictable. On Shabbat morning in the synagogue, one can expect to hear the weekly Torah portion as well as the *Shema* and the *Amidah*. Adults can appreciate revisiting the familiar and the comfortable, particularly if their lives are constantly bombarded by change.”

Interestingly, young children also appreciate this consistency and familiarity, as is evidenced in Mizel’s twice weekly

prayer service in the model synagogue at The Sherwin Miller Museum of Jewish Art. This prayer experience on Monday and Thursday mornings (traditional weekdays for reading the Torah), is infused with communal joy and connection. The student-led services are a unifying experience, where children gain practice in leadership skills and Hebrew proficiency in a uniquely spiritual context.

Dr. Wachs asks, “How does one create the kind of prayer experience that is rooted in tradition yet supportive of *kavannah*? This is the challenge to any Jewish school, but it is particularly challenging to a school in which the student population is not religiously observant, or includes children and teachers of other faiths” (as does Mizel). He laments that a key element often missing in school-based services, is the creation of “moments of depth.” His solution is to pay attention to the aesthetics of the prayer space. We

are moved by beauty and the visual environment, which helps shape our mood. Fortunately for us, the museum’s subdued lighting, beautiful artwork and antique ritual objects create a unique and spiritual prayer space, bringing all of us together.

A prayer service can also serve the purpose of helping pupils and teachers prepare themselves for the school day and its joys and stresses. It becomes the time to make us aware of significant events in our lives. We mark celebrations, offer prayers of hope for those we love who may be ill, by reciting the *Misheberach* (prayer of healing), and learn important ethical values through the telling of the weekly Torah portion. The bulk of Jewish prayer is about thanksgiving, appreciation, and gratitude and it is not by accident that Jews are called “*Yehudim*” (from *Yehudah*, the fourth son of our forefather Jacob), which means “thanksgiving.”

Robert A. Emmons, Professor at the University of California, Davis, has devoted his life to studying the role of gratitude in building a healthy life. His research demonstrates that people who “regularly get in touch with what they have” is what we strive for at Mizel and our beautiful prayer space and joyful services provide the opportunity for this to happen. ■