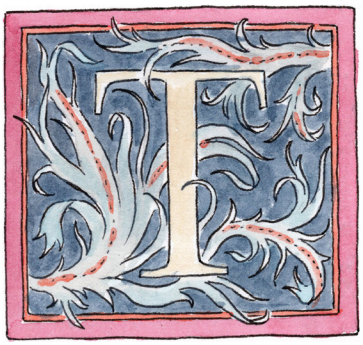
CAROLINE BRYK

Those Who Can, Teach

Those who can't, tech



THE JEWISH tradition offers many fitting metaphors for teachers. The Maharal of Prague saw teachers as sculptors of the soul. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch described them as gardeners tending to living plants. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik is said to have invoked the image of the teacher as a *sofer*—a Torah scribe—faithfully inscribing the Jewish inheritance into the minds of students, pupil by pupil, as a *sofer* does, letter by letter, onto parchment.

The teacher-as-scribe metaphor is as apt today as it was when Soloveitchik presciently uttered it a generation ago, if not more so. Back then, at the start of the digital age, the major consumer companies of the nascent computing industry were just getting started. But we never replaced Torah scrolls with computers. The practice of scriptural handwriting is not just a sacred commandment. Since the invention of the

printing press, it has been a persistent act of resistance, a declaration of independence from automation and a demonstration of the fact that there are certain acts of transmission we refuse to outsource to machines. Today, America would do well to extend that same conviction to our metaphorical scribes: teachers.

Approximately 406,000 teaching positions are "either vacant or filled by underqualified teachers, which is about 1 in 8 classrooms nationally." Nearly half of America's schools report having at least one vacancy, and declining interest in and reverence for the teaching profession have led to a major pipeline crisis. The Jewish community has not been spared this crisis. Interviews with more than 60 heads of Jewish day schools across the United States held over the course of the past year have revealed a sense of urgency regarding the future teaching force. One head of a school in New Jersey reflected soberly:

> The pipeline issue is huge. We cannot find teachers. And we are in Bergen County — if we can't, who can?! It is a quality and quantity issue. What do I mean? I am replacing exceptional veteran teachers with graduates of online colleges, with much less capability. And they are demanding the same salary.

The head of a major Modern Orthodox day school in New York City also lamented:

> What keeps me up the most at night is the thought of not having teachers. Every time a teacher leaves or retires, I shed a tear. I know I won't be able to replace them. If I am, I know it will be a person with a tenth of the experience.

The pipeline crisis has many causes, including uncompetitive pay and a culture that has degraded and demoralized teaching. Ed schools,

long notorious for ideological orthodoxy and low academic standards, have stripped rigor from the profession. They've taught their graduates that direct instruction is authoritarian, that imparting subject-matter knowledge is less important than "facilitation," and that student engagement matters more than student learning. This framework guts the intellectual authority of the teacher. In its place, the technology companies pressed their advantage.

As we stand at the threshold of an AI-driven world — and as classrooms become increasingly digitized and algorithms mediate instruction — we must not lose sight of the importance of placing a master pedagogue at the center of a serious education. This fight is existential, for Jews and for all learners. We must choose *sofrim* over software.

In the early 2000s, for-profit EdTech companies began positioning themselves as saviors of schooling who could finally unlock student potential. Within a couple of years, what had been a niche educational-technology market ballooned into a $165 billion industry that has embedded itself in nearly every aspect of schooling. More than two decades later, 88 percent of U.S. public school districts operate one-to-one device programs, schoolwide initiatives that assign each student his or her own individual learning device — most often, a Google Chromebook.

Having been at the forefront of the campaign to persuade schools to go phone-free, given the incontrovertible evidence of their negative effects on children, I now realize that while we were focused on the deck chairs, the whole ship was sinking. For the past decade and a half, Google has been moving fast and breaking things inside our children's schools, getting students hooked on their screen interfaces. As a 2017 *New York Times* article on the subject noted, "Schools may be giving

Google more than they are getting: generations of future customers."

Today's students move through the day tethered to screens: They might begin with math lessons on i-Ready, an adaptive instructional math app. During homeroom, they submit assignments via Google Classroom. They return to class to take quizzes administered on Canvas and learn through smartboard games such as Kahoot! Their homework is posted online, graded online, and returned online. From attendance to dismissal — and into the late hours of the evening — digital platforms now set the rhythm and structure of learning, relieving them of any need to pick up a pen or piece of paper.

Why, you might ask, is this a problem? Leading experts have begun to sound the alarm on the link between screen-saturated schools and diminished cognitive capacity in today's students. As neuroscientist Jared Cooney Horvath has now definitively shown in his book *The Digital Delusion*, today's children are, on average, less cognitively capable than previous generations were at their age. Drawing on more than 50 years of research, Horvath unpacks why the meteoric rise of educational technology is to blame. As recently summarized in *The Economist*:

> Long-term trends raise the possibility that the rise of in-class devices is responsible for an alarming decline in performance in reading and other subjects. Scores on 21 nationwide benchmark tests rose from 1994 until peaking in 2012-15, when screen use started to soar; they then began to sink. In major assessments for maths, science and reading from 2011 to 2019, greater in-school computer use for learning correlates with lower scores. In contrast, students in classes with rare or no computer use at all typically score highest.

We ought to take Horvath's warning seriously — not only because of its implications for our students but because of the threat screen

use poses to current and aspiring teachers. As Matthias Bitton wrote in a March 2025 essay in *Mosaic*:

> When students face the screen, the distinctive pedagogical qualities of the teacher fade into the background. Algorithms have recast teachers as consultants, facilitators, managers of classrooms that are no longer meaningfully their own.

Nothing could be more antagonistic to Jewish notions and methods of pedagogy embedded in the language of tradition. The term *rabbi*, the honorific of Jewish religious authority, literally means teacher, a display of reverence for teaching as the most revered of all vocations. For thousands of years, our rabbis, our teachers, have trained students to study in *chevruta* (partnership), a word meant to evoke the interpersonal connection that develops when peers engage together in study and experience its power. The Hebrew word for education — *chinukh* — is the same as that for dedication, an integral spiritual feature of the pedagogical dynamic between teacher and student. This concept is given beautiful and brilliant exposition in the 1932 book *Chovat Ha-Talmidim* (*The Students' Obligation*), by Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the teacher of the Warsaw Ghetto, shot to death in 1943. In Shapira's timeless words:

> The term, *chinukh*, applies to the readying for a craft which is within the inner potential of a person to do. . . . And when this word is used about educating children, the intention is to expand and develop the nature and talent of the child found in small measure, in potential or even in hiding — and to reveal it. . . . But an educator who wants to reveal the hidden and stored away soul of the student, to uplift it and set it on fire with a divine fire that reaches the Highest Holy One, such that all of him — even the powers of his body — grows in

> holiness and pines for God's Torah, he is required to soften himself towards the student that he is educating. He must delve into his juvenility and smallness until he reaches the spark of his stored away — or even hidden — soul, bring it out, develop it and grow it.

These examples merely tap the surface of what Judaism has to say about teaching as the medium through which interpersonal bonds are built and knowledge created. What we are witnessing today is nothing less than the displacement of that medium with digital, impersonal media designed by profit-seeking enterprises. Alarmingly, the educational establishment itself has been ushering in this digital dystopia. In the fall of 2025, a senior leader from Alpha School — a network that replaces traditional classroom teachers with personalized AI tutors — addressed Jewish day school leaders at a prominent tristate-area day school. In a beautiful beit midrash, surrounded by shelves lined with canonical texts, he made a forceful case for transitioning day schools to fully digital learning platforms, replacing traditional teachers with "coaches" who guide students through AI-mediated learning modules and dispensing with physical books until high school.

The educators present were right to feel a deep sense of unease. Reams of research indicate the primacy of print for reading comprehension, despite a perfectly misguided 2012 initiative by the U.S. Department of Education and Federal Communications Commission to transition American schools from print to digital textbooks in the subsequent five years. Somehow, a few of the school leaders are still intrigued by the billionaire-tech-entrepreneur-turned-education-reformer who promised to "optimize" learning.

Even media coverage of these developments is a case in point. As I was considering writing a response to an article I read online about AI in Jewish day schools, I was informed that it probably wouldn't be published. Why? Because the article itself was sponsored (i.e., paid-

for) content. Apparently, I had failed to pick up on the underlying profit-motive dynamics of what I had read online.

Schools are simply the newest frontier in the techno-capitalist colonization of our minds — ours and our children's. In recent discussions about the teacher shortage, the prevailing response I have heard is simple: *Not enough teachers? Deploy AI tutors.* It may sound pragmatic, even innovative. But those who say it seem unaware that they have been conditioned to see it this way by the very same multimillion-dollar tech companies that are algorithmically guiding the rest of their decisions. The solution seems perfect by design because the problem itself is by design.

Recent studies have seen teachers attribute their departure from the profession to the proliferation of these tech tools and the stress and anxiety they cause. Massachusetts middle school teacher Benjamin Coleman, for example, left the profession after 10 happy years in Fall River. "The day that the principal told us that we needed to do i-Ready three times a week, that's when I was done. . . . That's not what I went to college for." As classrooms become increasingly digitized and algorithms mediate instruction, talented, idealistic young people — those who aspire to careers in the art of teaching — will be dissuaded from entering the field.

It's even worse for teachers who embrace the techno tools and thereby hasten their own professional demise. When Google saw the market opportunity in public schools, it bypassed administrators and marketed directly to teachers, "the gatekeepers to the classroom." Administrators such as Lachlan Tidmarsh, then the Chicago Public School District's chief information officer, acquiesced as a matter of fait accompli, concluding, as a 2017 *New York Times* story put it, "If individual teachers were already using Google's services, the district should officially adopt the platform — to make sure, for instance, that younger children couldn't email with strang-

ers." Was this just a coincidence, or is it more likely that Google is good at engineering human behavior as well as software?

Replacing teachers with proprietary algorithms will not solve the shortage — it will worsen it. The early-adopting teachers of AI seem unaware that they are fostering their own obsolescence. What need will there be for costly teachers when you have AE (artificial education) generating lesson plans, creating assignments, and even grading work that was probably produced by AI itself? The teacher-pipeline crisis, in the Jewish community and in America as a whole, is in fact a prelude to the teacher-identity crisis, when the educator is recast in our communal imagination from an architect of continuity, to borrow a phrase from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, to a supervisor of machines.

Unfortunately, even with mounting evidence highlighting the harmful effects of educational technology on learning, we cannot rely on legislation to address the problem anytime soon. Google, Meta, and other major tech platforms possess the legal resources, lobbying influence, and indirect funding mechanisms to stymie nationwide reform. Those of us seeking to fight against them find ourselves operating under what social psychologist Jonathan Haidt has recently called their "corrupt vetocracy," a system in which concentrated interests can block meaningful reform even when broad public and bipartisan support exists. In this vetocratic system, change must begin locally, which is precisely where Jewish institutions can — and must — serve as moral leaders.

Our day schools have a playbook for getting tech devices out of schools: In 2023, we at Tikvah launched a campaign to mobilize a national network of Jewish day schools to go phone-free, bell to bell, well before legislation took effect. This shift was driven by aggressive

local campaigns: holding regional conferences; giving presentations to parents and boards across the country; drafting model policies for schools to iterate; and providing heads of school the opportunity to sit and rewrite policy collectively.

With bills proposing restrictions on EdTech under consideration in 16 states so far this year, the time is ripe for the Jewish community to reclaim its role as a moral and educational leader and a protector of our nation's children. As these bills move through state legislatures, the national network of Jewish day schools should be among the first institutions that lawmakers can point to as evidence of the positive outcomes from a return to personal pedagogy. While individual districts and schools such as Kansas's McPherson Middle School have already begun reversing course on EdTech devices, the Jewish community offers a scalable model for sharing educational philosophy and practice that has proved catalytic in the fight against phones in schools.

A campaign against one-to-one devices is already underway in the Jewish day school community. In recent years, Manhattan Day School, Atlanta Jewish Academy, and Ben Porat Yosef (a day school in northern New Jersey) have significantly scaled back or eliminated their one-to-one device programs, recognizing the detrimental effects of screen-saturated classrooms on student learning. A series of recent events led by Tikvah convened school leaders to spark action and tackle these challenges. In late February, leadership teams from 18 Jewish day schools gathered for a program with Horvath for a sober discussion on the ways digital classrooms violate the neurobiology of learning. In the weeks that followed, several school teams reconvened to reassess their technology programs, conduct in-school tech audits, and draft plans for thoughtful rollbacks. The following month, leaders from more than 40 additional schools convened in Miami and heard from educational consultant Emily Cherkin about

the harms of screen time in school and her congressional testimony on the subject. While legislative solutions may take years to materialize, communities, be they religious, local, or otherwise, guided by shared values and moral clarity, can be the pioneers charting a better course.

To conclude where I began, Jewish communities today possess the printing and manufacturing technologies to mass-produce flawless Torah scrolls. And yet they do not, because writing Torah scrolls by hand is a mitzvah. A civilization that refuses to automate its scripture must refuse to automate its teachers. There is profound wisdom in the commandment to write Torah scrolls by hand. Labor creates deep attachment, binding our people to our text. I'm willing to bet that at some point while reading this article, you felt a moment of gratitude for a teacher you had, perhaps many, perhaps not so many, years ago. For me, it was my fifth-grade English teacher at Ramaz, a Modern Orthodox co-educational day school on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. My teacher was Ms. Vicki Ginsberg, who challenged the class to memorize 59 lines of Robert Frost's "Birches," which I can still recite to this day. Ms. Ginsberg understood something essential: A love of text is often born in laboring with it.

Rabbi Joseph Lookstein, the founder of Ramaz, wrote that Jewish educators are "associates of God." That doesn't sound replaceable to me. If only we treated them that way. ✳

CAROLINE BRYK leads Tikvah's comprehensive Jewish day school portfolio, directing field-wide conferences, retreats, and programming for heads of school and board chairs. In 2021, she founded Tikvah's Jewish Parents Forum and continues to guide its strategy and national programming.