

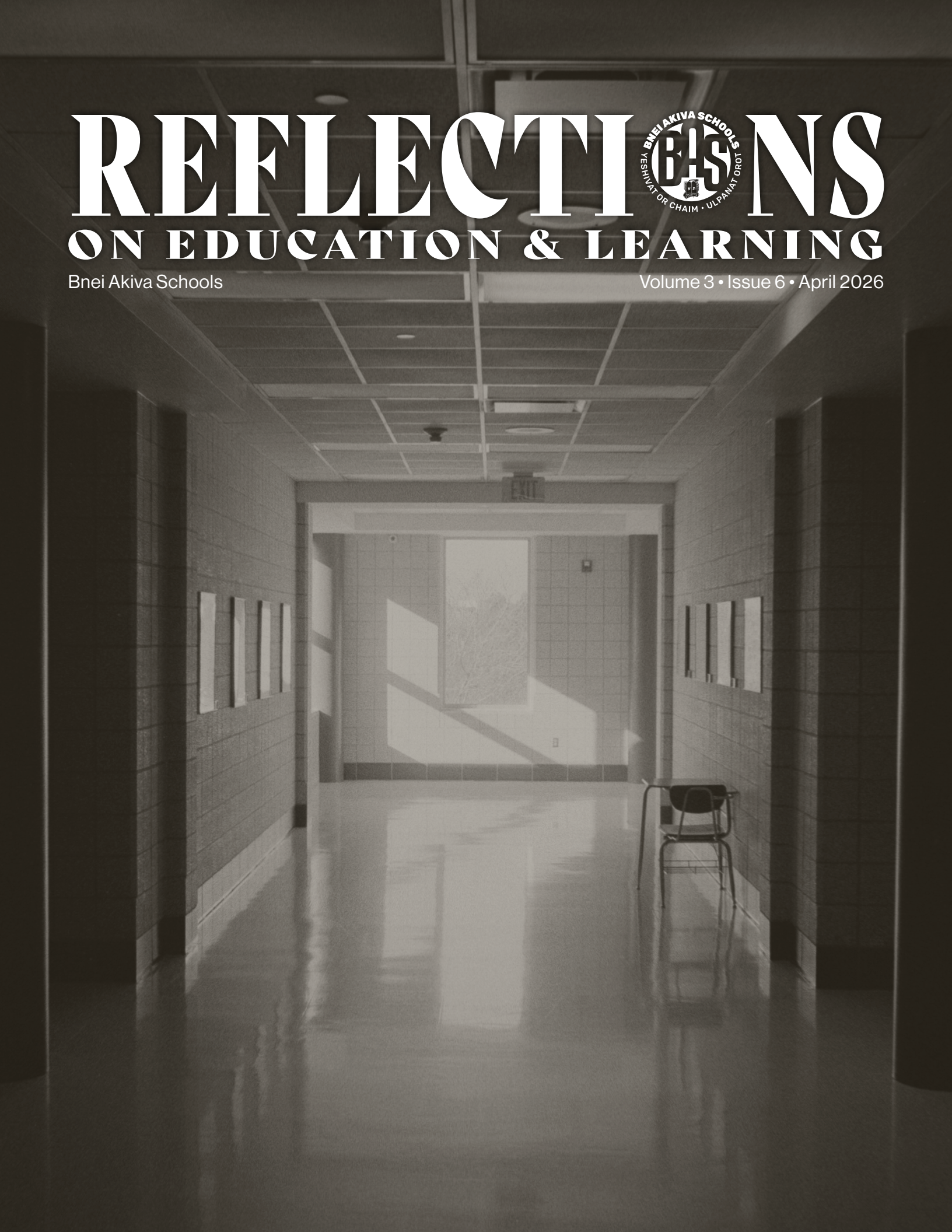
REFLECTIONS

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POSTSECONDARY GUIDANCE IN A CHALLENGING TIME



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September, 2019: I settled into expanded responsibilities in my then-role as Dean of Students at YOC. Included in my new responsibilities that year was leading postsecondary guidance. I met with all grade 12s in the fall, and began meetings with grades 10 and 11 in the winter to plan their next steps. And then, of course, the status quo changed drastically.

The pandemic marked the first significant change in postsecondary guidance and trajectories. Our 2019 graduates lost the last few months of yeshiva in Israel. Many of them spoke about how they have heard from former graduates how crucial those final months can be for internalizing and crystalizing the messages of their time in yeshiva. Some of them were not interested in returning to Ontario for postsecondary study after that. They did not

want to attend a school that would be holding online classes for at least the first semester in Sept, 2020. That year we had a notable percentage of YOC graduates remaining (or perhaps more accurately returning, having been sent home early due the pandemic) for Shana Bet. Many of our 2020 graduates were also not enthused about returning to a mostly-online Ontario school in Sept, 2021 either. While extending for a second year of yeshiva study certainly happened prior to 2020, it seems to have become much more common within our school community from the pandemic onward. Once they stay for a second year and have that sense of belonging solidified, they may enlist in the IDF, make aliyah, study in Israel.

Fast forward past the pandemic to the next significant event to affect post-secondary guidance: October 7, 2023.

While there is much to be said about the post-Oct 7 era, I'll keep my focus narrow to postsecondary applications and study. The need to defend Eretz Yisrael has motivated many of our graduates to enlist. Graduates who had finished their army service were called back up, or volunteered to return. For example, a 2011 graduate who was in the US for clinical rotations as part of medical school on Oct 7 told me he was back in Israel and back in uniform as soon as he could physically get there. A graduate from nearly 10 years ago who had spent years in the army and was supposed to be beginning his studies in an Israeli university in fall, 2023, instead spent much of the next two years back in uniform. I attended a 2022 graduate's wedding recently and he acknowledged his friends who were unable to be at the wedding, who were defending the State of Israel. The aftermath of the Hamas attack has lengthened army service and disrupted so much of life in Israel, including postsecondary study.

Struggles for Jews on North American university campuses since Oct 7 have been well-documented. It can be hard to see the nuance in some of it. As part of his PHD thesis¹, Dr. Saltsman interviewed post-high school members of the Modern Orthodox community. Some of them expressed how difficult it was in the weeks/months after Oct 7 when their classmates/friends began posting anti-Israel content. His thesis also discusses students who felt uncomfortable showing their Judaism, or felt compelled to respond to deeply anti-Israel classmates or even professors. Over the past couple of years, we have invited alumni and Hillel/JLIC professionals on Ontario campuses for "Inside Ontario Universities" panels. We have heard about a wide range of experiences. One

York University Social Work student told us that she had trouble finding classmates to work with her on group projects because she was Jewish. Students at GTA campuses have told us about wearing a kippah on campus without issue, or not even noticing any real difference post-Oct 7 (e.g. in the Engineering program). More recently, a TMU student told me he has had Iranian, non-visibly Jewish and Israeli students all approach him positively to speak about the war in Iran, to voice concern about antisemitism and wish him well. Obviously, U of T experienced pro-Palestinian encampments that included clearly antisemitic, anti-Israel language (Gurney, 2024). How is it that some students face minimal antisemitism, others have positive experiences, and yet some face negative interactions daily?²

I'll repeat what a York University representative told me when I asked about antisemitism on campus: there are over 55,000 students on campus. The majority of them are not interested in being involved in protests related to the Middle East. And so - if you avoid the protests, if you avoid classes that delve into the issue, if you're careful about which professors you choose, if you're in a program that isn't known to have issues with Israel/Jews - you'll be ok. For some students, that's an acceptable experience. Some people will say that Jews should not be intimidated out of these spaces: we were barred from Canadian society in the past and have earned our right to live and thrive here (Feinberg, 1945). Others say we have returned to an era of "conditional acceptance" (Klein Halevi, 2024). We have those who believe Yeshiva University/Landers are the right choices at this time, to allow Jewish university students to thrive in a Jewish environment.

¹ See Saltsman (2026) for more information.

² For a more in-depth look, see Brym (2024).

Others (as covered in Dr. Saltsman's thesis) will say Israel is the only option where they feel safe, and can find a broader sense of purpose and community.

So how do I advise students where to go for their postsecondary study in an era with so many differing opinions, and so much unknown moving forward? The answer to me is clear: the right path for each individual student/family. A family who believes strongly in sending to Yeshiva University should be supported in that application. Another student who is only considering Israel will need support considering the Israeli university options and navigating that system. A student who will be going straight into an Ontario school will be supported in his application process. It's important to provide the differing perspectives so everyone can make an informed decision, and that decision will be different for different students.

The next challenge that has increased over the past couple of years is the increasingly competitive nature of some of the schools/programs our students are applying to. Yeshiva University has seen huge increases in applications/enrollment (Weissman, 2024). Their Honours program has gone from a program for top students to one for truly elite students. Many top programs in Ontario have become increasingly challenging to gain acceptance to (Hurley, 2025b). Across the province, students with near-perfect averages and strong resumes find themselves disappointed (Hurley, 2024c). Grade inflation has made matters worse: with so many 90%+ students, some obviously deserving students will not end up with spots in their chosen program, while others with inflated grades won't

have actually "earned" their marks and will enter university unprepared for postsecondary study (Crawley, 2023). Student interest in General Arts programs has been declining (at York University, for example; Hurley, 2025a), while interest in degrees that are viewed as more practical, such as Business and Engineering, have seen increased interest, increasing the competitive nature in those programs. It has all become so stressful and frustrating for our hard-working students (and the guidance counselors share in that disappointment and frustration).

Given this challenging and ever-changing landscape, how do we move forward at Bnei Akiva Schools?

- We want our students to be well-prepared for university. We ask our alumni if they feel prepared, and they usually say yes. It's important to retain standards that prepare them well.
- Prepare for an uncertain future by covering your bases well. Students themselves change a lot through high school, and can continue their growth in Yeshiva/Seminary programs. Where a student thinks they're going to study in Grade 9 or even Grade 12 may not be where they end up studying. Doing well throughout high school keeps those doors more open.
- Building a solid roster of extracurricular activities should be considered throughout high school. Ideas include athletic teams, Model UN, Mock Trial, in-school clubs, Tikvah programs, DECA, Ontario Summer Company, internships, summer work, new initiatives/ideas, etc. Students should

² See Kowarschick (2012) for more information.

³ See Springpoint (2018) for more information

⁴ See Rapp (2023, August 2) for more information.

find extracurriculars that speak to them to engage in during the school year/summer.

- Students shouldn't think "only grade 11 and 12 grades matter." It's true that Ontario schools only consider grades 11 and 12, but US/Israeli schools look at 9 and 10. Beyond that, not everyone can just "turn it on" for grade 11. Study habits and learning skills need to be developed throughout high school.
- It's always good to have a back-up when applying for postsecondary study.
- Colleges and trades have so many more offerings than they used to. Many people are opting for the more "practical" College trades over the now-less-popular General Arts degrees.
- Unfortunately, rejection is part of life. Not every student will gain acceptance to every program they want. However, there are so many programs and options out there: students will find a school and a program that speaks to their interest.
- To better support our students in their postsecondary applications (essays for the US and supplementaries in Canada), we've added application writing units into our English curriculum. We look forward to continuing to grow and expand on these, as application writing and "personal narratives" can be important life skills beyond postsecondary applications.

My general advice to students stressing about their future would be to focus on what they can control: their effort in classes and

building their extracurricular profiles. Value the learning in their classes, and enjoy outside-of-the-classroom opportunities they are interested in. Start your postsecondary journey by entering as strongly as possible.

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