



REFLECTIONS

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JUDAISM & PEDAGOGY



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Becoming a baal teshuva wasn't an instantaneous realization. It unfolded gradually, like the art and science of teaching pedagogy. Curiosity, reflection, experience, and mentorship guided me to Judaism, and in many ways, this journey mirrors how I approach teaching: through identity exploration, belonging, and meaning. My name is Claire Oziel and I have been working in the education field since 2009. I am happy to be welcomed to teach at Ulpana this year.

I grew up as a secular Canadian Jew; Judaism was meaningful but limited. What was central to me from a young age was responsibility and care for the world. I began my career instructing environmental education in nonprofit organizations like Evergreen Brick Works and Outward Bound Canada. These companies emphasized experiential learning

by engaging mind, body, and values, and shaped how I think about education today.

As a Lead Educator with Outward Bound Canada and as an educator at Evergreen Brick Works, both located in a state of the art environmental restoration project site in Toronto, I designed and facilitated experiential, place-based learning programs that prioritized safety, inclusion, and meaningful engagement. I led youth and community groups through hands-on outdoor and environmental learning experiences such as rock climbing, hiking, and canoeing. I supported co-educators, managed risk, and adapted programming to meet diverse learner needs while fostering leadership, resilience, and critical thinking. Outward Bound Canada's¹ mission is to develop resilience, leadership, and compassion through challenging outdoor experiences that

¹ See Outward Bound Canada (2026) for more information.

encourage participants to step beyond their comfort zones and reflect on personal growth. Evergreen Brick Works² mission emphasizes building thriving cities through nature, community, and sustainability, using the site as a living classroom to promote environmental stewardship and civic engagement. There, I created the annual clothing swap, supported the Farmer's Market, and Children's Garden Program.

At the same time as my outdoor educational endeavours, I took a post-graduate certificate in food security, deepening my understanding of ecological, social, and cultural systems and how they shape identity. Food security refers to the consistent access to sufficient, safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food that meets individuals' dietary needs and supports a healthy, active life (World Food Programme, 2025). I saw a connection between learning to grow food sustainably in a community with social and environmental responsibility. During this period of time, a friend encouraged me to explore Judaism as it is so intricately linked to social values.

My Jewish learning progressed in programs like Adamah at the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Centre³. The Adamah program at the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center is an immersive Jewish environmental leadership initiative that integrates sustainable agriculture, ecological awareness, community living, and Jewish learning to cultivate personal, spiritual, and social responsibility. This program introduced me to Judaism as an embodied practice, connected to the moon, seasons, land, and ethical living. Through all of these opportunities, and as Lead Educator for

Shores Jewish Environmental Programs in the GTA, I saw firsthand how Jewish learning thrives when it's experiential, allowing learners to discover meaning rather than being told what to believe, while simultaneously connecting with others and creating bonds. I can see how this kind of learning is deeply relevant at B'nei Akiva Schools. At Ulpana, for example, Torah learning is woven into daily student life through tefillah, divrei Torah, Shabbatons, tisches, and programs connected to Jewish holidays and real-life contexts, allowing students to internalize and apply Torah concepts beyond the page. I can see how engaged and enthused the students are by Jewish life, inspired and transferred through the incredible Judaic staff at the school.

I decided to take my experience in outdoor education to the classroom. In 2014, I earned my Bachelor of Education at York University with teaching specialization in English and Social Sciences. Since then I have taught at a variety of private and public schools. One of my favourite assignments that I developed for a Grade 11 Family Studies course at Richmond Hill High School asks students to interview family members to better understand who they are and where they come from. Many begin expecting a simple task, only to uncover stories of migration, resilience, and values that shift how they see themselves. I experienced the same in my own Grade 11 Writer's Craft class, when I interviewed my grandmother who escaped Czechoslovakia just before Hitler invaded. Today, her 19th century furniture sits in my home, not only for utility, but as a daily reminder of our people's hardships and continuity.

² See Evergreen (2025) for more information.

³ See Adamah. (2026) for more information.

My relationship with Judaism deepened through travel to Israel, mentorship, and marriage. A mentor once encouraged me simply to speak to HaShem, advising me to “knock on the door and say hello.” That framing removed fear and replaced it with relationship and curiosity, an approach that I take when stepping into the English classroom. I apply this approach by inviting students to read texts and meet them with conversation, encouraging them to ask questions, listen for emotions, and moments of tension, which build meaning and ultimately connection to their own lives. Through reflective writing, discussion, and personal response, students consider how themes such as responsibility show up in their own experiences. This helps them move beyond analysis toward meaningful application, where reading becomes an encounter that shapes how they think, feel, and act. Our grade twelve English classes have delved into themes such as technology, artificial intelligence, social media, and oppression. They have reflected on how technology has impacted them as well as how they wish to proceed with their engagement with various platforms.

I spent several years teaching in the public school system, never having experienced antisemitism—until September, 2023. Two consecutive encounters with slurs by ignorant students, followed by the worldwide protests against Israel after October 7, left me shaken. I felt drawn toward Jewish educational spaces, toward teaching Jewish youth, and toward continuity.

Teshuva is often translated as “return,” but it is also about alignment. Today, at B’nei Akiva Schools, I feel aligned: my pedagogy, my

values, and my Jewish life working together. I love practicing Judaism. I married into a large observant family where culture and tradition run deep, the centre of family life. I have noted the importance of exploring and developing personal narratives as well as reading other’s stories in order to uncover a sense of self. In my pedagogical practice, I hope to guide students to explore their own identities, histories, and values through story and reflection. My journey as a baal teshuva has become inseparable from my teaching: both are experiential, relational, and rooted in a sense of belonging.

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