Judaism, as a religion and a culture, places a high value on education and scholarly pursuits. As Jewish schools of varying affiliations and denominations look for ways to improve and revive programming, some are exploring the Montessori method. Based on education that follows the child, Montessori focuses on respect, independence, and preparing an environment that nurtures a child's natural desire for discovery. Jewish schools and Jewish parents are finding that Montessori meshes well with core principles of Jewish faith and culture, such as care for the environment, self-sufficiency, independence, and justice.

Combining Montessori education and religious education is not new. In "Three Expressions of Faith in the Child: Snapshots of Christian, Islamic, and Jewish Independent Schools," Anderson (2007) noted that religious educators have long considered Dr. Montessori to be a suitable collaborator in their work. Writing about her observations of a project in which children at a Christian school planted and tended a garden containing grapes and grain destined for religious ritual use, Dr. Montessori stated, "These notes about our experiment in religious education represent only one attempt, but already show the practical possibility of introducing religion into the life of the little child, as a rich fount of joy and uplift" (1948, p. 302). Anderson noted that Montessori was known for a "famously spiritual side" (2007).

Despite its devotion to spiritual pursuits, Montessori education does not endorse or espouse any specific religious beliefs, focusing instead on universal values. In "Nourishing the Spiritual Embryo: The Educational Vision of Maria Montessori," Miller (2002) asserted, "Montessori's faith was not merely sectarian—it was a transcendental, mystical spirituality, and as such it touched upon core religious teachings at the root of nearly all world traditions." Writing on behalf of The Montessori Foundation, Seldin and Epstein (2007) described how religion is customarily handled in Montessori classrooms:

While Montessori does not teach religion, we do present the great moral and spiritual themes, such as love, kindness, joy, and confidence in the fundamental goodness of life in simple ways that encourage the child to begin the journey toward being fully alive and human. Everything is intended to nurture within the child a sense of joy and appreciation of life.

In the essay "Fanatical Secularism," Glenn (2003) described religion as providing a lens through which academic subjects are viewed: "Does being taught a tradition and taught within a tradition prevent questioning? Of course not; it provides the content that makes questioning fruitful" (p. 188). In his article "Montessori Movement Offers Jewish Educators an Alternative," Harris (2005) noted a growing number of highly educated parents frustrated with the level of academic excellence found in traditional Jewish day schools, driving the push for Montessori. According to Susan Lazev, a co-founder of The Child's Way: Derech HaYeled, a Jewish Montessori school in West Orange, NJ, employing the Montessori approach can serve as a type of kiruv, a method of reaching out to build community by bringing in families not affiliated with a congregation who otherwise might not seek religious education (Harris, 2005).

Rivky Ross, head of school at Netivot—The Montessori Yeshiva in Edison, NJ, explained, "Jewish Montessori is a really compelling solu-
tion to many shortcomings of Jewish education,” and suggested that one reason families are drawn to Jewish Montessori schools is because they are able to provide the classical elements of a traditional Jewish education, just in a different format that has “empirical evidence of success” (R. Ross, personal communication, March 8, 2010).

Jewish Montessori schools have found that the method’s emphasis on the prepared environment allows Jewish values and practices to be infused throughout the curriculum. In The Discovery of the Child, Dr. Montessori (1948) described the religiously prepared educational environment:

Religious education considered in accordance in the same general terms as the method as a whole includes the preparation of an environment in which several divisions are distinguishable—those which might be referred to practical life, and those which, corresponding to what the school refers to the development of the mind, deal with the development of religious sentiment, the education of the spirit, and the religious knowledge which constitutes the culture necessary to understand religion. (p. 297)

For example, Practical Life activities may be designed to allow children the opportunity to learn how to set a Passover seder plate, bake challah, or tie the knots found on ritual prayer shawls. Jewish teachings such as Bal Tashchit (prohibition against waste), Tza’ar Ba’alei Chayem (prohibition against causing pain to animals), Lo yodah u’lishomra (stewardship for the earth), Shmirat ha’guf (requirement to care for your physical body), and Shalom ben Adam l’havero (creating peaceful communities) are found in the Montessori approach, calling for care of the environment, animals, and self, while promoting respectful interactions through exercises of grace and courtesy.

Jewish education traditionally includes the study of Ivrit (Hebrew language), and Jewish schools have found that classical Montessori language materials, such as three-part nomenclature cards, matching sets, sandpaper letters, and moveable alphabets, support students in acquiring Hebrew vocabulary and fluency. At the Menachem Mendel Seattle Cheder, early childhood director Marave Herbstman pointed out hand-made letters, fashioned from black velvet. She noted the directresses’ decision to make the Hebrew letters distinct, fashioned to be soft and pleasing to the senses. These didactic language materials complement social and religious studies, allowing children to expand their knowledge of Jewish practice, literature, and nomenclature.

Montessori teachers have long created supplemental materials that are culturally relevant for their students, such as three-part nomenclature cards, matching and sorting materials, and Practical Life exercises. In Jewish Montessori programs this is especially necessary; ready-made materials that meet the combined standards of the dual curriculum are challenging to find. As Jewish Montessori schools serve families of various levels of observance, affiliations, and customs, teachers have the ability to create and tailor materials to meet specific needs within a Montessori framework.

Designing and making materials is time-consuming work, and a few companies have responded to the increase in Jewish Montessori programs by offering Hebrew language materials and Judaic studies activities designed to be used in Montessori schools. Jewish Montessori, a material supplier operated by Chabad Lubavitch of Beijing, China (2010), offers sandpaper letters and moveable alef bet (alphabets) in both Hebrew scripts and block print. Child-sized ritual objects and moveable lunar/solar calendars are available, as are Montessori-based preprimary sorting activities for Jewish subjects, such as Brachot (prayers), Kosher dietary laws, and Old Testament tales. It stands to reason that as Jewish Montessori schools increase in number, so will the number and variety of Judaic materials available through retail outlets and teacher and school collaborative efforts.
In an article on the second annual Jewish Montessori Partnership Conference, hosted and held in Clifton, NJ, by the Yeshiva Shaarei Simcha School, Harris (2005) reported an increase in the number of Jewish schools adopting the Montessori method. Conference attendance doubled from the previous year, with 60 educators representing 20 schools of various Jewish affiliations and observances, as well as representation from several counties.

Many of the schools shared a history of being parent-initiated (Harris, 2005). Rivky Ross said that Netviot is one such school, started by two mothers looking for an alternative to traditional Jewish day school options (R. Ross, personal communication, March 8, 2010). With strong parental support, Netviot has steadily grown and aims to add one grade level per year to serve children through eighth grade. Menachem Mendel Seattle Cheder has two Montessori early childhood rooms, a “Torah Tots” room for 2-year-olds, and plans to expand into infant care.

Curious about how Jewish Montessori fits into the larger Montessori community, I asked Ms. Ross for her perception of how educators within the secular Montessori community regard the use of the method in a Jewish educational setting. She replied that she felt “extremely supported” and welcomed by her Montessori colleagues (R. Ross, personal communication, March 8, 2010).

As the Jewish Montessori movement grows, so does the need for qualified teachers who are well-versed in both Montessori pedagogy and Judaic studies. The Center for Jewish Montessori, established in New Rochelle, NY, is now closed, but for a short time offered a teacher education program described on their website as offering “Jewish educators comprehensive, professional Montessori training integrated with a Torah curriculum” (2008). According to the Center’s website, which is no longer active or archived, consultants offered assistance and support for new school development, environmental design services, and outreach education (2008).

The authenticity and effectiveness of Jewish Montessori teacher training programs, in comparison to secular Montessori accredited training programs, has yet to be determined. Rivky Ross expressed concerns about whether such programs dilute the Montessori method. “The verdict is not in as to how this will look a decade from now,” she said, stating her preference for traditional Montessori credential programs that offer “the full gamut and sequence” of the method (R. Ross, personal communication, March 8, 2010). Since the Center for Jewish Montessori closed, long-term results of Jewish Montessori teacher training programs are not available.

Marave Herbstman, early childhood director at the Menachem Mendel Seattle Cheder, noted that while it would be ideal to have directresses trained in Jewish studies, Hebrew, and Montessori together, finding staff with all three qualifications can be challenging. In her school, the responsibilities for curriculum are both split and shared, with each primary classroom staffed with a Montessori trained directress and a Jewish studies and Hebrew teacher (M. Herbstman, personal communication, September 15, 2011).

When asked if there were areas of the curriculum in which the Montessori method might conflict with Jewish tradition or beliefs, Ms. Ross believed that the timeline of life, age of the universe, and by extension, geology, posed the greatest challenges (as Jewish schools traditionally approach history from a biblical perspective) but stated that Netviot staff had yet to “find a topic without resolution.” Ms. Ross noted that in cases of philosophical conflict between Montessori practices and pedagogy and religion in her school, the viewpoints of Judaism take precedence over Montessori pedagogy (R. Ross, personal communication, March 8, 2010). Marave Herbstman echoed this sentiment, describing her school’s approach as using “Montessori methodology with Jewish philosophy” (M. Herbstman, personal communication,
As a scientist, educator, and spiritualist, Dr. Montessori understood that there was a place for religion within education, giving children the spiritual knowledge and cultural framework to function within society. The growth of Jewish Montessori education stands to benefit both Jewish schools and the secular Montessori community, as both share the goal of developing capable, confident, and spiritually awakened children.

References


MIRIAM COATES currently works as an educational consultant, curriculum designer, and writer. She has previously worked as a Montessori directress in San Francisco, Phoenix, and Seattle. She is AMS-credentialed (Early Childhood). Contact her at miriam@outlinestudio.com.

Photographs by Miriam Coates at Menachem Mendel Seattle Cheder