

Integrating Computers into the Religious School Classroom

by **Lauren Resnikoff**
and **Rabbi Leonard B. Troupp**

About ten years ago, my former senior rabbi, Leonard Troupp, who founded and chaired the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) Committee on Computer Technology and the Rabbinat, began to discuss with me ways that computers could be used in our religious school. He had been researching the trend of integrating computers into secular school classrooms and had some very exciting ideas as to how computers could enhance the way we teach Hebrew and Judaic subjects. Rabbi Troupp found a donor to fund the purchase of equipment and gave me the task of trying to figure out specifically how they could be used to enhance our teaching, how to train teachers, and how to motivate teachers to use the equipment and technology we planned to purchase.

A Tool in Service of the Teacher and Students

We believed that computer technology in the religious school initially would be a difference in degree, not kind, with the technological innovations that came before, viz., film strip projectors, 16mm projectors, overhead projectors, etc. That is, the computer was not an end in itself, but a tool in the service of the teacher and students. That is why we made a decision that we would not set up a computer room, which was the current trend at that time, when religious schools utilized computers. We wanted our computers in each classroom, easily accessible to the teacher and student, so that it could be an organic part of the lesson plan. Though we knew this would be more costly initially, we felt it would be more pedagogically sound. Therefore, each classroom would be equipped with a computer workstation and a large screen monitor so that all computer use would be visible to the entire class.

We also made a decision that we would not spend all of our funds up front; rather, we would allocate funds so that each year we could purchase additional hardware so that our hardware didn't all become obsolete at once.

Because the "computer room" model was so prevalent, when we first proposed the subject of computer technology integration to our teachers, many of them felt they already had limited time, asking "how would we make time for technology?" I explained our premise that the computer was not an end in itself and would not be a pullout activity. Instead, it had to be integrated into what we were already teaching. Although we did not want to use technology to change the way we teach everything, we did feel that there would be some subjects that would benefit from the use of computers in our classrooms.

And we did not want to tell our teachers how they must use this technology. In truth, we really didn't know ourselves. We understood that for this to be a successful project – and not something glitzy for our congregation – our teachers and administrative staff had to work together to develop models that did not yet exist. So, as a staff, we began the journey together. I selected two teachers who I thought would be most open to exploring the use of technology in their classrooms. I sent them home with computers and software to explore over the summer. (This was years ago when not everyone had a computer at home.) I also found a local secular workshop on educational technology and sent another teacher to that workshop. Their mission was not only to learn how to "use" a computer, but also to explore ways in which they thought computers could be utilized in the service of our curriculum. After a summer of exploration, these teachers returned to us enthused and filled with innovative ideas and suggestions for all of us to consider. As they spoke with other teachers about their experiences, excitement within our staff began to build, and we also began to see the possibility that computer technology was different from previous technological innovations, not only in degree, but also in kind. We began to see the possibilities of greater student participation and greater parental participation.

At the same time, I requested and received grant money from our local federation to provide a stipend for each of the fifth grade teachers to work with me over the next summer to develop a technology-enhanced curriculum for our lifecycle and Israel units. Together, we created a curriculum that incorporated software that we sent home with the students and Internet sites that we used both at home and at school. Because the teachers were part of the process, they were eager to work with the curriculum and the computers that year. Once one grade was excited about what was happening in its classrooms, the rest of the

Classroom computers are not an end in themselves, but rather are tools in the service of the teacher and students. The author offers insights into how one congregational school integrated computers into its classrooms.

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Technology can be a powerful tool for learning. For example, students can use computers to create PowerPoint presentations of cities in Israel, which can then be compiled onto a CD-Rom to send home or be posted on the school's website.

staff wanted to be involved as well.

Today, the school has a desktop station, with Internet access, as well as a 27" monitor in every classroom. Over the past four years, two laptops were purchased per year and now the school has eight laptops. "Wireless" Internet access and a wireless printer were added within our building. This setup affords teachers a great deal of flexibility in integrating technology into their classes. Students can do independent work on a computer or work in small groups. They can also work as a class using the large-screen monitor. And, for larger projects, the school also has an LCD projector.

Examples of Technology-Based Projects

Some examples of technology-based projects that the teachers have done with their students using this equipment are:

- ♦ Instant messaging a teacher's son who is studying in Israel. He answered questions about life in Israel. He also e-mailed the class digital pictures of himself as he put their notes into the Wall.
- ♦ Recording prayer tunes in an MP3 format that students can listen to on their iPods.
- ♦ Using videocams to make live connections with people in Israel.
- ♦ Working together in collaborative groups to create PowerPoint presentations of cities in Israel. These presentations can then be compiled onto a CD-Rom to send home or can be posted on the school's website.
- ♦ Creating a mock newspaper from a period in Jewish history.
- ♦ Accessing information in the classroom on current events.
- ♦ E-mailing parents information and related Internet links about what their child is learning in class.
- ♦ Creating PowerPoint presentations for Open House that display digital photos of the students learning in our school.

- ♦ Taking our students on "virtual Jewish field trips" around the world.
- ♦ Designing and using webquests to learn about world religions.
- ♦ Creating game show-style games (such as "Who Wants to be a Millionaire") and playing them with the class using the big screen and projector.
- ♦ Designing and using Internet scavenger hunts where students have to find answers to questions by using pre-selected websites.
- ♦ Creating a class website that showcases the topics of study and offers additional website links for further information on those topics.
- ♦ Using timeline software to create interactive timelines of Jewish events.

The teachers have become so much more comfortable using technology that they now turn to the Internet for resources for their classrooms. Our progress reports have been set up through a word processing program so that the teachers can type the reports. And many of them regularly communicate through e-mail.

Enhancing Jewish Learning

There are also, however, challenges to address in using computers in your school. Teachers must always be prepared with back-up lessons in case the technology (or the Internet connection) is not working properly. Funding for repairs and computer maintenance must be allocated yearly. Filtering software must be set up before students can access the Internet. New teachers must be trained as they join the staff. Internet sites must be researched in advance to check for accuracy of information. And it does require extra planning and preparation time for teachers to pre-select sites for student research.

Even with these challenges, the integration of computers can greatly enhance our Jewish learning. Through the use of computer and Internet technology in Jewish education:

- ♦ Students will use a methodology that motivates and excites them.
- ♦ Our students can learn that although much about Judaism is "ancient," being Jewish is very contemporary.
- ♦ We can break down the confining (and sometimes jail-like) four walls of the classroom and open our students to the world of the greater Jewish community.
- ♦ We can involve our parents in their children's learning with the prevalence of computers in their homes and begin a journey into lifelong learning for our families.

Computer technology provides us with many possibilities, including those we have yet to discover, for promoting lifelong Jewish learning in our classrooms. 