

# CONNECTIONS

## Tanach

Joseph Kushner Hebrew Academy Middle School

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“You can learn it over and over and still learn something new.”

Eytan Mendelow

### Connecting It All

At JKHA Middle School, we pride ourselves on the connections our faculty have with our students outside the classroom as much as inside; with their *neshamas* as much as their minds. Our Judaic studies faculty model proper *midot* in every realm-- spiritually, intellectually and socially. So, too, Tanach is not just another academic course taught by our Tanach teachers. Certainly, the students must learn the basics; however it is even more important to us that they learn how to love what they are learning and to live their lives as Torah observant Jews. We hope this issue will help give you insight into how our Judaic Studies faculty guides our students into making these connections at the JKHA Middle School.

~ Debbie Finkelstein

### Why Care About the Encampments? ~ Rabbi Yaakov Feit

The Torah in *Parshat Bamidbar* spends over 35 *pesukim* detailing how *B'nei Yisrael* camped in the desert! Why would the Torah give so much attention to a topic that was a temporary arrangement for *B'nei Yisrael* and has seemingly no relevance to future generations?

In Chumash students discover that there are many lessons we can learn from the encampments of the twelve tribes:

1) The Torah's focus on the order of the camps teaches us the importance of order in one's life. Organization is an essential skill for one who strives to follow the Torah. Adherence to the many details of the *mitzvot* and meticulousness with regards to the timing of them requires a sense of order.

2) The uniqueness of the encampments of *B'nei Yisrael* lies in the fact that they encircled the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle). Three tribes camped in each direction with the *Mishkan* in the center. As the tribes traveled through the desert, the center and focus of their lives was the *Mishkan*, the dwelling place of Hashem. The Torah's emphasis on this arrangement teaches us that Hashem and the Torah must be the focus of our lives as well.

3) Another lesson learned from the encampments in the desert is the importance of being in positive surroundings. Rashi points out that the tribe of Reuven who neighbored the family of Kehat was negatively influenced by Korach, a descendant of Kehat. On the other hand, the tribes of Yehuda and Yisaschar became great Torah scholars because they were inspired by their neighbors, Moshe and Aharon.

“Woe onto the evildoer and woe onto his neighbor. Good onto the righteous one and good onto his neighbor.”

4) The *medrash* describes that every tribe had a flag with a different symbol. The symbol of the tribe represented that tribe's unique characteristic. Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky points out that the emphasis of each tribe's strength did not cause jealousy between the tribes. Each tribe recognized that they had a special strength that could be used toward one common goal - the service of Hashem.

One of our most important goals as parents and educators is to help children find their special strengths and talents and find the confidence to use those characteristics to become the best people they can be.

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## Connections

“I like learning Chumash because we are learning life lessons, discovering our heritage and the history of our nation.”

Jonathan Lefkowitz



“Even word of Chumash can teach you a lesson and you learn from your past.”

Jonathan Zughaft

### The Essential Bridge ~ Rabbi Daniel Price

At JKHA it is a primary goal to outline a continuum of skills and goals which will be emphasized and strengthened from year to year. For Chumash, in particular, the opportunity to develop this continuum is truly rich. Dating all the way back to their early elementary school years, where students are first introduced to the basics of reading and translating the Chumash, and all the way to their high school years where multiple *Rishonim* (Medieval Rabbinic commentators) are a part of the regular course of study, it important to match these skills with the developmental stage of the learner.

The middle school years have a very unique and important role in the Chumash continuum. Simply put, it is the essential bridge between the basic study of Chumash during the elementary school years and the intense study of Chumash during the high school years.

As early adolescence and the desire for independence begins in middle school, the

introduction to *rishonim* is intensified. Towards the end of elementary school, our students study Chumash with the commentary of Rashi, while also mastering the ability to read Rashi script. The interpretation of the Chumash is linked to the insights of the Rashi. In the Middle School, our students are exposed for the first time to an array of *rishonim*. They begin to interact with other opinions which differ, at times, from Rashi. Commonly referred to as “the *Mefarshim*” our students begin to study Ramban, Ibn Ezra, Seforno and the like. The classroom discussions broaden from “what does Rashi say” and “what is Rashi’s question” to a comparison between Rashi’s commentary and the commentary of other *mefarshim* or the other *mefarshim* against one another.

Yet, to really meet the developmental needs of our students, we challenge them to play the role of the *mefarshim*. We ask them to read a *pasuk* or skim through a section of *pasukim* to identify syntactic, linguistic or theological issues

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### The Wave of Our Past Making a Flash In Our Future ~ Rabbi Yaakov Haller

Within the Judaic studies curriculum in our Middle School, textual based learning presents one of the most challenging experiences we offer our students. Our *Rabbeim* and *Morot* have found ways of incorporating textual based study and this benefits students immeasurably.

To understand a few of these benefits, let us briefly explore this concept of textual based learning as it applies to Tanach, specifically Chumash. Textual based learning is simply defined through its title as the analysis of a given text for the purpose of comprehension and retention. In practical terms this means that a teacher provides students with a formal text that directly correlates to a particular lesson, and utilizes that very text as a primary visual.

For example, in a basic lesson pertaining to the *Aseret Hadibrot* (Ten Commandments), the *pasukim* (verses) from the Torah would be the source text and primary visual. Throughout the lesson’s progression, students would follow through the text and be introduced to the commandments. While the effectiveness of this methodology is very dependent upon the learning / processing style of each student, the following are a number of its inherent virtues:

Foremost, textual based study allows a student to truly internalize the words of the Chumash. With diligent practice, students can attain a level of proficiency that will enable them

to decipher *shorashim* (root words of the Hebrew language) and piece together a general understanding of any assigned text. When this breakthrough takes place, a person’s perspective of Torah undergoes a healthy metamorphosis, delivering a fresh dose of excitement into his/her *limud* (Judaic study). The remarkable merit of this achievement alone would certainly warrant a mass call for textual based study through all grade levels, yet coupled with “conditioning,” it takes on even more importance.

Conditioning for our specific purposes is the development of an individual’s comfort with the text of Tanach, to the point where there is a desire to locate and read through the respective source(s), for the sake of exploring it on one’s own. Successful conditioning is in part born through a proficiency in various skills [such as noted above with *shorashim*], as well as from recognition of the sources’ innate value. Students are regularly exposed to Tanach through textual sources, analytical skills and therefore provided with depth to our treasured Torah well beyond its standard translation. The empowerment resulting from the application of such skills is enormous and will only strengthen through the student’s habitual usage.

Yet, no matter how many qualities we can relate to the worthiness of textual based study, none can compare to the practical

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## Study of Chumash Through the Commentators ~ Mrs. Sorah Shaffren

The study of Chumash provides the opportunity for students to expand their skill sets in various areas, including reading comprehension of text and Rashi, as well as critical thinking skills. It also allows students the chance to grow spiritually, as we analyze the text and connect it to our own lives. By examining the way the text in *Sefer Bamidbar* describes the set up of the camp of Israel in the desert, 6<sup>th</sup> grade students have been honing their note-taking and analytic skills, as well as absorbing valuable life lessons in Jewish *hashkafa*, or outlook.

We have been discussing some of the most well known commentators on the Torah, including Rashi, Ramban and Nechama Leibowitz. We discuss when these individuals lived and how their historical context affected their commentaries. For example, *Rashi* lived during the First Crusade, a time of religious persecution in Medieval France, and his comments often hint to a message of encouragement to the Jews living during his time. The very first comment on *Sefer Bamidbar* that Rashi makes is regarding the counting of the nation. Rashi explains that when someone regards something as precious, he will count it again and again, and G-d loved the People of Israel so much that He counted them many times. We also discussed the life of Nechama Leibowitz, who was influential in the development of Torah pedagogy in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and Rabbi Yehuda HaLevy, the medieval Jewish philosopher who authored *Sefer Hakuzari*.

When examining the arrangement of the camp of Israel in the desert at the opening of *Sefer Bamidbar*, we studied three opinions regarding the centrality of the *Mishkan*, or the Tabernacle. For each opinion, we discussed the commentator, when he or she lived and what he or she is famous for; we wrote down the opinion and drew a picture to depict that idea. The theme of this unit was the importance of holiness in the camp of Israel, as symbolized by the placement of the *Mishkan* in the center of the camp, equidistant from all of the tribes of Israel. Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi compares the camp to the human body and explains that the *Mishkan* symbolizes the heart and the tribes symbolize the limbs. Just as the heart pumps blood, the source of life, into the body, the *Mishkan* spreads spirituality into the camp and sustains its level of holiness. In addition, we discussed how our *Beit Midrash* is in the center of our Middle School, and how important it is for us to remember the presence of G-d in our lives just as the Jewish People did in the desert.

The connections we draw between the text and commentators are what make our Chumash class a dynamic and exciting place to learn and grow. Just as each tribe had their own path to the center of the camp, the *Mishkan*, each student has his or her own path to a successful connection to Torah study.

"I like the stories and they inspire me to keep the mitzvot."

Rachel Roth



## Applying the Lessons of Chumash to our Daily Lives

~ Mrs. Chaya Glaser

*Sefer Devarim* which, is also known as "*Mishne Torah*", is a repetition of most of the Mitzvot that are mentioned in previous books. Moshe's speech that he gives right before his death is very important in outlining the history of *B'nei Yisrael* from the time they left *Mitzrayim*.

The goal for our students is to focus on improving their reading comprehension, analyzing *Mefarshim* (commentators) and developing critical thinking skills that will help them become independent learners.

Students are introduced to some of the well known *Mefarshim* of the Torah: Rashi, Ramban, Abarbanel, Siftei Chachamim and more. They are also introduced to modern commentators such as Nechama Leibovitz and Menachem Leiptag.

In the first part of his speech, Moshe is

reprimanding *B'nei Israel* for the bad deeds of their parents. Because of the repetitions in this *sefer*, we compare and contrast the story in *Sefer Devarim* to its original source. We examine the text side by side and the students are encouraged to find the differences.

For example, when learning in *parashat Devarim* about the story of the *meraglim* (spies) we compared it to the one in *Sefer Bamidbar*, *Parashat Shlach* and we found that some details were omitted from the story that Moshe is telling in our *sefer*. The main contradiction is in the question of who initiated sending the spies. In *Bamidbar*, we learn that Hashem is the one that tells Moshe to send the *meraglim*, if he chooses to and here in *Devarim*, we see that the request came from the nation.

Another difference is that in *Bamidbar*,

"We are learning that the Chumash is not just a history book, but it is related to our everyday lives."

Kurt Moskowitz





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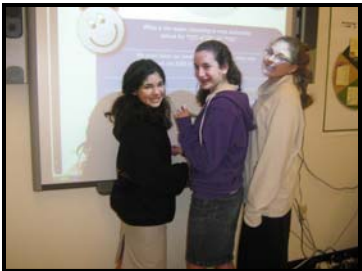
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"I like Rashi because it shows that there is more than one opinion on the Chumash."

Lyndsey Shulman

## Applying the Lessons of Chumash to our Daily Lives *(cont.)*

Hashem tells Moshe who he needs to send and their position. In *Devarim*, we read that Moshe sends *anashim* but their position is not mentioned. Therefore, in class we compare the differences in the text and then analyze why the text in *Devarim* is different. This leads to excellent class discussions and the classroom is alive with many differences of opinions. The excitement grows when we reach the *pasuk* that tells us that Moshe agrees with the request of the people and he sends the *meraglim*. Here the students ask some critical questions; What is wrong with this picture? What question arises by this *pasuk*? In order to figure out the answer, they need to remember what Moshe is doing (reprimanding them). "Wait, if Moshe agreed to send *Meraglim*, why is he mentioning it now in the *Tochacha*?" (When he reprimands them) the students ask.

We connect the text of the Tanach to real life experiences in order to gain a better understanding of the text. For example, when Rashi explains why Moshe is angry at *B'nei Yisrael*, even though he agreed to send the *meraglim*, Rashi brings an example of someone trying to buy a donkey. The buyer is asking the seller to allow him to ride the donkey in different places to test if the animal is strong and when the seller agrees, the buyer then understands that nothing is wrong

with the donkey. He therefore decides there is no need to test the donkey and buys the donkey immediately. In order for the students to understand this better we updated the example and compared it to buying and testing a new car. The buyer is asking the seller to take the car for a test drive in different road conditions. When the buyer sees that the seller does not hesitate he understands that the car must be in good condition and he decides to forgo the test drive and he purchases the car.

Through these examples we are able to process this information and come to the understanding of why Moshe is upset with *B'nei Yisrael*. When Moshe agreed to send the *meraglim* and let them check different things in the land, he expected *B'nei Yisrael* to understand that he is confident that the report they are going to get from the *meraglim* will be accurate. They should have told him that they don't need to send *meraglim* and they should have agreed to go immediately to the Promised Land.

It is exciting to see the students engaged in learning Torah and on the road to becoming independent learners.

## The Essential Bridge *(cont.)*

that arise from the text. This method of study encourages our students to read with a critical eye, to avoid taking the text for granted, and to identify the areas which were left open to interpretation. This method caters to our students' developmental desire to voice their opinion.

Finally, instead of focusing on the *perakim* or chapters established by the 15<sup>th</sup> century printers, we begin to study the text "*parshia*" by "*parshia*". When we say the word "*parshia*" we are not referring to the *Parshat HaShuva* or the like. Instead we are noting the paragraph-like breaks in the Torah. These breaks date back 3,000 years to the giving of the Torah and provide us with a guide to identifying the various topics in the Torah. The point of focusing our attention to these "*parshiot*" is to help our understanding of the Torah. Just like each and every one of the five *Chumashim* has a

central theme and goal, each and every paragraph-like *parshia* has a theme and purpose. When studied in this manner, our students gain a better understanding of the prophetic message laid out for us in the Torah.

When we study *Chumash* we always have been focused on the point that we are reading the words of *HaShem*, the Creator of the World. The purpose of mankind and the special assignment of *Bnei Yisrael* are found in these prophetic words. It is therefore up to us to find the best way to hear the messages and be able to relay it to the next generation. The only way that we will be able to achieve this goal is to continue to hone our *Chumash* skills and put in the time necessary to effectively study the text.

application of a hands-on learning approach. Time tested wisdom has proven that it is the hands-on approach to education which most significantly intrigues students while simultaneously enhancing their knowledge base. Better comprehension,

stronger retention and an enjoyable educational experience – textual based learning is one instructional approach that will undoubtedly never become outdated.