



**Middle School Newsletter
(January-February 2019)**

See below for details about what has been going on in the last couple of months for our Middle School. As you know, every child is not in every class, but each child is in the classes that are relevant to them, based on the initial survey at the beginning of the year and the follow up survey in December. If you'd like more information or to speak in detail about this program, please let us know.

We welcome all feedback!

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Middle School Thursdays

4:00-5:00 pm

Modern Jewish Heroes with Stephanie Lederman:

Students in this class have been studying modern Jewish heroes, a broad topic that encompasses many different Jewish people. So far, we have learned about Elie Wiesel, Golda Meir, David Ben Gurion, and Albert Einstein. As we round out the second trimester, the students have begun a project to study their own “Modern Jewish Hero”. Together, we brainstormed who some additional modern Jewish heroes could be and came up with people such as Benjamin Netanyahu, Anne Frank, Jerry Lewis, Steven Spielberg, Natan Sharansky, Bob Dylan, and others. The students were able to share information about some of these people while others were new to them – and sometimes they were even surprised to hear someone was Jewish!

The students are currently working on creating an “Instagram-style” page for the modern Jewish hero of their choosing. After vacation, they will show the class who they have been studying, with the hope that they will learn about many additional Jewish heroes before this class is finished for the semester. It has been wonderful to see the way in which the children find connection to these people, especially through Judaism.

Tikkun Midot, Refining our Character Traits with Rabbi Zach Sitkin:

In Judaism, we are meant to examine our character as much as, if not more than, our commitment to ritual practice. For the rabbis, especially those who identify with the Mussar movement, Judaism ethical literature, a ritual practice devoid of real and sustained character growth becomes vapid. In order to stimulate character growth in our middle school students, the students in this class have explored six different, yet equally important character traits that are deeply rooted in the Jewish Tradition.

These include:

- *Rachamim* (Compassion)
- *Hitlamdut* (Openness to learning from others)
- *Anavah* (Humility)
- *Savlanut* (Patience and recognizing our anger)
- *Chesed* (Loving-kindness)
- *Emunah* (Trustworthiness)

In order to make these ideas more concrete, we have looked at narratives from the Torah as well as exegetical commentaries on pertinent segments from various *parshiyot* that provide a textual basis for these *midot*, giving space to talk about the main ideas written. We then discuss how we either succeed or fail at integrating these characteristics into our daily lives. Each class, we begin with a recap of our progress in these different areas of growth from week to week.

5:00-6:00 pm Electives

Based on conversations with our middle schoolers themselves, they are interested in having an elective time during their weekly Religious School experience. In this hour, the program varies between Art, time with Yuval (our Shinshinit, or Israeli emissary), cooking (or working with food), nature-based activities, and other one-off experiences that interest the children. The class had a really fun and meaningful experience turning cucumbers into pickles recently around Tu B'Shevat. Most recently in this hour, we have begun looking at innovations in Israel and the students have specifically taken a liking to the idea of drip irrigation. We then took another look at some quotes both from the Torah and from secular literature regarding the environment that we had looked at when we made pickles and used those quotes in connection to drip irrigation. We also planted seeds to grow in Beth El's garden, and soon will be creating our own drip irrigation system to use outside once we plant our seeds. As we had said in December, we know that cooking and finding connection to Jewish food in particular is something that interests our middle school children and we are working on ways to incorporate food and work with our hands into our elective sessions.

Middle School Sundays:

9:00-10:00 am

Tefillah and Jewish Rituals with Morah Ann and Morah Sigal

Since returning to school in January, we have created a tefillah rotation for our middle schoolers. Our first week back, we joined the Religious School community in Kehillah where Jack Klebanow, Beth El's Music Director, led our community in a musical tefillah experience. We invited any musicians in our midst to play with Jack in the future and look forward to our next experience with him on Sunday, March 3rd.

We then began looking at different parts of a Shabbat morning service, based on feedback from our students about what they are most interested in. During one *tefillah* experience, we took a look at the Torah service with the tunes we use here at Beth El on Shabbat. We learned that many pieces of the text are different *p'sukim* (verses) that come directly from the Torah and we sang the service together, as many of the students were eager to review it.

Next, we embarked on a multi-week exploration of the Amidah. At first, we focused in on just the first three *brachot* (prayers), learning that they are most often the same and are blessings of praise. We then chanted the first part of the Amidah together for practice. After this, we looked at the middle section, which is different on weekdays than it is on Shabbat and Holidays. We noticed that on weekdays, the prayers we say are asking requests of God, while on Shabbat and Holidays, we are celebrating the holiness of these days, more so than asking anything. Learning the meaning behind important prayers like the Amidah has helped the middle school students connect on a deeper level to the prayers, which we hope continues through their b'nei mitzvah experiences and beyond.

At the beginning of February, we joined the Beth El community for the World Wide Wrap, some of us wrapping tefillin for the first time. This was a wonderful way for us to connect to the larger community and we look forward to more experiences like this in the future.

10:00-11:00 am

Hebrew

During this time on Sundays, we divide into two groups. One group works in various workbooks from our Hebrew curriculum, focusing more on phonetic Hebrew with Morah Ann, in addition to a focus on different Hebrew reading skills to help everyone continue to feel more confident in their Hebrew ability. Some of these students also spend time one-on-one with our volunteer Hebrew specialist, Jeff Mittleman. Everyone is practicing identifying Hebrew letters, reading skills, and writing skills, doing so individually, in small groups, and of course with the assistance of educators and our Hebrew specialists.

With Morah Sigal, the class gives the students whose Hebrew reading has passed that of our workbooks a chance to continue to not only improve their reading and comprehension skills, but their Hebrew speaking skills as well. In this class, the kids look at Hebrew script letters, focus on building simple sentences, and have short conversations. Every week, we try to build on what we learned the week before by expanding our simple sentences into longer ones. Learning personal pronouns has helped the students build simple sentences in Hebrew, as has expanding vocabulary with different nouns. We practice speaking in front of the class as well as writing and reading. It is wonderful to see the students working seriously, seeming appropriately challenged by the material and participating to continue to improve their Hebrew reading, writing, and speaking abilities.

11:00 am-12:00 pm

Tikkun Olam (Repairing the World) with Morah Ann:

Our Tikkun Olam class has spent time doing text study around the concept of repairing the world prior to deeply embarking on creating ideas for our own personal Tikkun Olam work. In order to better understand the concept of tikkun olam, we studied the part of Parshat Noach that tells the story of the rainbow and compared its words to the

words of the song The Rainbow Connection. Through this study, we determined that we felt the rainbow could stand for promise, hope, and happiness, all characteristics we felt were important when thinking about tikkun olam. We then did research to find organizations that shared these ideas with the word 'rainbow' in the name; we found two different charity organizations, studied their missions and noticed the work that they do, which helped guide us as a group when thinking about how we want to give back as a class. Before February break, we brainstormed thoughts and ideas about tikkun olam projects to focus on for the rest of the semester as well as what populations of people we may want to help. Once we get back, we will begin working on this project.

Additionally, while our 6th Graders were in the BE Mitzvah Experience in January and February, the 7th Graders were able to participate in two different tikkun olam projects. In January, we made sandwiches to donate to Hope Community Services and in February, we put together arts and crafts packages for patients at the Valhalla Children's Hospital. These projects were able to concretize some more of the tikkun olam work we are able to do, and we are excited to expand upon it in the coming weeks.

Israel Education with Morah Sigal Fanning:

As we continue to learn about different aspects of Israel, we are uncovering the multiple landscapes that lie within. In January, we began learning about the currency used in Israel and the difference between *shekalim* (the money used in Israel where 1 *shekel* is worth only a little more than a quarter here in the U.S.) and *agurot* (the change in Israel worth less than 1 *shekel* – not worth much!). We have also learned about the prime ministers and presidents of the State of Israel, focusing on the differences between the roles of the Prime Minister and the President and the impact they had on things like pluralism and democracy. In addition, we have focused a little bit on Israel's geography – both the physical landscape (including Israel's elevation levels, Israel's small size, and water issues) as well as the countries bordering Israel. We hope to move into some of the deeper meanings behind the geography of Israel today next.

Additionally, around Yom Ha'atzmaut, or Israel's Independence Day, we hope to put together a program for the younger grades about Israel, and the students are very excited about the idea presenting something to the younger grades.

Coming Up:

We have found immense success in much of the change that has happened for our Middle School this year. We have evolved from where it began in September and will keep making slight changes as we evaluate.

For the third trimester, about five weeks, we will be splitting up by grade for the 4:00-5:00 pm hour on Thursdays based on the grade your child was enrolled in Religious School last year (and your current grade for new students) in order to be sure that a few things from the past curriculum are taught. In this third trimester, our sixth graders will be focusing on the Jewish life cycle with Rabbi Sitkin, learning about birth, b'nei mitzvah (which they are already doing in the BE Mitzvah Experience), marriage, divorce, conversion, and death. Our seventh graders will be focusing on their own personal theology, understanding how their own personal theology may change as they each go through the b'nei mitzvah process, and *Hiddur Mitzvah* (the idea of glorifying God) and how that connects back to their own personal theology. Sundays will continue as they are for the time being, spending some additional time focusing on Yom HaZikaron and Yom Ha'atzmaut to prepare for the program the children will be presenting to our younger grades. After Passover, we will commemorate Yom HaShoah and Yom HaZikaron and will celebrate Yom Ha'atzmaut, as mentioned above, in engaging and meaningful ways.

It is clear that project-based learning helps keep our middle schoolers engaged and we look forward to continuing that method of learning through the end of the year. We are excited about where this year has taken us and look forward to continuing into the third trimester with a positive mindset.

We look forward to seeing you back here on Thursday, February 28th!