

# The Workshop-Based Beit Midrash (WBBM)

## 1. Vision

The Workshop Based Beit Midrash is an environment where students can regain ownership of their Torah learning. It provides students with the opportunity to deepen their areas of interest, learning with classmates, peers and teachers, in a co-learning environment. It allows students an authentic experience of Torah study, where they can move at their own pace, without the arbitrary limitations of grade, periods or subject areas. In the WBBM, students *take responsibility for their academic growth, choosing ways to advance their intellectual capacities, and, at the same time, continue to improve their middot.*

## 2. Program

The main idea behind the WBBM is to break away from the arbitrary constraints imposed by grade level classes, the defined subject matter frame and the extrinsic motivation of grades. The WBBM is designed, in this initial phase, to work with middle school students, who have garnered academic skills and Judaic studies background, in order to slowly start to identify individual areas of interest. By gathering middle school students and faculty in one room, the WBBM intends to create an opportunity for a more dynamic level of sharing, a deeper level of collaboration and more stimulating level of intellectual exchange, which in turns, will feed the students natural thirst for learning.

The WBBM is staffed by at least five educators, who while they have their own areas of expertise, are equally able to navigate the different subject areas that comprise the Judaic Studies program at the school, i.e. Tanakh, Toshba, Hebrew, Jewish History and Dinim/Halakha. Given the projected size of the middle school for next year, the WBBM will allow a ration of 1:8, which provides ample opportunity for one-on-one, small group, larger group and grade level meetings, as deemed necessary.

In order to ensure the success of this new program, the middle school faculty is committed to hold a daily, hour-long meeting in order to assess the success of the program, the progress of individual students and address the changes needed, as we move forward.

The foremost goal of the WBBM is to see each student as a discrete individual, with passions and challenges, interests and shortcomings of their own. Each student, at least at this beginning phase of the project, will be expected to fulfill the requirements of a core curriculum in the different subject areas; each faculty member will be expected to articulate the core curriculum in ways that provide the students with a meaningful, rich, integrated and wholesome experience.

Every two weeks, each student will be given an action plan for that time period. (See attached student schedule example) Within that action plan, students will be given the opportunity to

fulfill assignments on a variety of areas, from academic work to art, from physical education to service learning, from interdisciplinary research to exploring personal areas of interest.

## **1. Preparation for the implementation of the WBBM**

The WBBM deviates from the current traditional approach to education the school has been involved in. Its successful implementation will require a thoughtful articulation to all stakeholders - students, faculty, parents, board members. It is important that the school creates an environment of trust among all parties involved, with an open dialogue, discussion forums, teacher training, student input, and full transparency.

We understand that the WBBM will need a culture change and we have a plan on how to address it.

### **Students**

We have created pilot weeks with the current 5<sup>th</sup> grade students (incoming 6<sup>th</sup> grade), in which they can experience the WBBM approach, reflect and feedback on it. We have worked on discrete periods, in which students had the opportunity to “choose” what they wanted to work on. Given the positive student feedback, we extended this trial period to a weeklong lab, in which students had the opportunity to work within chevrotot, with their teacher or independently. We will extend this pilot classes to current 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade students as well, in an attempt to give them and ourselves, the opportunity to reflect on the approach, assess its benefits and challenges, share in the experience, and as a consequence, build a more solid and stronger program for next year.

### **Faculty**

The administrative team and the middle school faculty will work together during the summer, in planning for and organizing the WBBM, by jointly learning the different approaches to fostering student engagement, independent learning skills, and reflecting on each one of the incoming middle school students. We are interested in potentially bringing in educators who can guide us in ways to ensure the success of the program. We are in contact with a couple of professors from Brandeis Jewish studies department, as well as former heads of schools in the country, who might be able to work with us as “advisers”.

We are also investigating the possibility of formal professional development opportunities the faculty that will be directly involved with the WBBM.

Additionally, we have already held small “parlor meeting” style forums with our middle school faculty (including general studies teachers), our Judaic studies faculty (grades K-8), and our middle school Judaic studies faculty (6-8). We have also scheduled a larger “parlor meeting” with other stakeholders, such as board members, community rabbis and parent representatives.

### **Parents**

Parents’ understanding of this new approach and their buy-in are vital.

Parents will be invited for a couple of parlor meetings about the WBBM. Their inquiries and feedback are invaluable in helping us better articulate the goals of the WBBM, as well as the process through which it will be executed.

### **Board Members**

The educational leadership team, headed by the Head of School, will hold a formal presentation of the

WBBM to the Board of Directors. While we understand that educational decisions reside solely on the hands of the Head of School, it is imperative that the board, as primary ambassadors of the school to the outside world, be fully aware of this new educational initiative, and able to articulate it to those outside of the school walls.

## **7. Problems it is trying to address**

In today's construct, students are programmed to think about particular topics at particular times of the day, in particular ways.

The student, like every one of us, is a learning being. They know how to do it if given the opportunity to do it. Students are natural explorers, they are curious, they want to engage. Furthermore, the more students are given independence in seeking meaning in their learning, the more they will tend to deepen their education at large and, we believe, their Jewish education in particular.

In trying to emulate the "secular" system of education, the Jewish education system has stifled some of the positive aspects of a system Judaism has developed through out several hundred years: the Beit Midrash – a place where students are encouraged to learn with each other, develop solid learning partnerships, create a "Rav" for themselves (i.e. a mentor), all while fully understanding that Judaism is not an academic subject, but a way of life.

## **7. What would it look like?**

The WBBM will provide an environment where students can create their own schedule, based on what they need to do in a particular learning period. They will also be given the autonomy to choose extra-curricular areas of interest, such as gardening, service learning, music or photography, for instance. They will be able to choose to dedicate two straight hours a whole morning to their Chumash project, for example, instead of being limited by a 42-minute period.

Upon entering the WBBM, one will be able to see several students buzzing around, working on different assignments. A group of 6-8 grades students might working on Chumash skills with one educator, while a second smaller group is learning with a teacher via Skype (blended learning). A couple of students might have chosen to work on a cooking project, exploring ingredients found in the traditional Ethiopian cuisine; this would have come after the students had the opportunity to interview a member of the Ethiopian Jewish community in Israel, collect a couple of "home recipes", and write a couple of paragraphs about their learning process and their findings. These materials will be part of the collective "recipe book" being created by the whole middle school about the different Edot.

At the garden, half a dozen of students are tending their garden as part of their Hebrew lesson. All conversations are held in Hebrew, while these students explore a different facet of their learning.

Klezmer music is the topic of interest of a group of 6-7-8 grade students, who are interested in understanding the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe, and are channeling their interest through their music.

These are only a few examples of what the WBBM can become. (See more about the range of

possibilities we see in the attached document – “What if...”)

## 1. Goals and how we would know we have reached them

The goals of the WBBM are therefore the following, what we have called the WBBM manifesto (see attached as its own document):

Students will become independent learners.

Students will explore and deepen their interests in Judaic studies.

Students and teachers will forge a stronger connection with each other.

Students will appreciate the fact that Judaism is not a subject matter, but a way of being in the world.

Students will explore their heritage, in all its wisdom, wealth and complexity.

Faculty will plan curricula and instruction with the “whole student” in mind.

Educators will become the spiritual counselors they can be, assuming the *de facto* role of “Mashgichim Ruchani'im” (spiritual counselors).

Students will develop and strengthen their multi-intelligences.

Upon entering the Beit Midrash, one will hear the voice of Torah - *Kol Torah*.

## 1. Educational Approaches (the how)

### A short word on each one of these approaches

- Portfolio

Students will be given bi-weekly action plans (called here Portfolios). As students progress and the WBBM continues to be fine tuned, students will have more autonomy in creating their bi-weekly assignments and schedules,

- **Blended Learning** - Students will be able to expand their learning outside the walls of the school. Potential teachers in Israel have already been connected as a beginning process of investigation. We will be running a trial “group” with the current 5<sup>th</sup> grade, on a Skype learning session on Parashat HaShavuah. Jewish history, environment, and Hebrew are other areas (just to mention a few) that could be enriched through blended learning approach.
- **Project Based Learning (PBL)**

*"Research has shown that students learn content as well or better using PBL than with traditional instruction. It also shows that students remember what they have learned longer and are better*

*able to use what they have learned. PBL provides the opportunity to learn and practice skills that traditional instruction often ignores -- working in groups, making choices, monitoring progress, thinking deeply about a problem or challenge, and communicating what has been learned. In short, PBL helps students not only learn content but also the 21st-century skills they will need to thrive in a quickly changing, globally connected world."* (John Mergendoller is executive director of the [Buck Institute for Education](http://www.edutopia.org/project-based-learning-experts) (BIE) - <http://www.edutopia.org/project-based-learning-experts>).

- ✓ Students will learn about the laws of building a Sukkah and will build the school's Sukkah.
  - ✓ Students will learn about the effect of fermentation after 18 minutes and will try to bake matzot following the halakha.
  - ✓ Students will learn about Eruv in Toshba and learn how to check it before Shabbat.
  - ✓ Students will build a model of the Beit Mikdash based on the measurements given in the Torah
  - ✓ Students interview Holocaust survivors and create testimonial video archives.
  - ✓ Students will learn about ritual objects by creating – throughout their 3 years in middle school – their own “ritual trunk”.
  - ✓ Artists in residence could be invited to work on ritual objects with the students.
  - ✓ Students will be encouraged and mentored in preparing themselves to teach at community wide Jewish learning opportunities such as Limud or Hazon!
- **Chevrutah** - allows students to work with a partner, developing a deeper learner-to-learner relationship, building on each other's strength, and further developing the student's inquiry skills with their peers.
  - **Pod Learning** – a creation of a space where a group of students can focus on a particular topic (potentially choosing to work in Hebrew or not - or other languages, for that matter)

**Independent Study** - Every student will be required to choose an area of interest to delve into. Students will become “experts” on a particular topic, develop a research plan, explore resources, and develop a way to teach and present their “findings” to the whole middle school contingent. Example: Student shows interest in Arie Kaplan? Student can read 3 of Kaplan's books and write a summary, or a review, and present it to other students or members of the faculty; student is interested in developing fluency in Hebrew? Student reads Israeli literature in Hebrew and creates short animations about them to be shared with other schools, as a “trailer” of the book...

- **Language “stations”** – Given the heterogenous nature of our student body, the WBBM will give the students the opportunity to develop their language skills according to their particular level, from entry level (parallel entry) to advanced students, who might choose to conduct most of their day in Hebrew.
- **Guest Speakers – There are three components to this particular approach.**
  - a) The WBBM allows the flexibility of time and space to bring guest speakers in a variety of topics. We currently bring experts to speak to our students, however, this usually mean some level of disruption of the students day, sometimes needing

- to interfere with classes to whom the speaker is not necessarily relevant. The flexibility of the WBBM will allow a readiness to bring guest speakers/educators, who could work with the whole group or select smaller groups.
- b) Additionally, we are considering a once-a-week open Beit Midrash style, in which we invite community members to commit themselves to a certain number of sessions, in which students are divided into groups according to interest. For instance, one group focuses on science and Torah; another will focus on Jewish thought and Halakhot around lashon ha'ra, and so on.
  - c) A third component is one that has already been mentioned above, in which guest speakers can be "brought in" through conference calls, Skype and other online tools. Within this category we are thinking of, not only teachers from Israel, but also reaching out to other communities, around the world. One aspect would be to connect with members of Jewish communities in other areas of the world. A second one is to continue the work we have started this year with Face to Faith foundation (<https://www.facetofaithonline.org/>).

## Sample Student Schedule

**Red – Indicates example of student's input/Blue – Indicates reassessment of the previously set schedule**

**Black – Indicates (potential) default schedule**

|   | Monday  | Tuesday           | Tuesday          | Wednesday  | Thursday         | Friday    |
|---|---|-------------------|------------------|------------|------------------|-----------|
| 8:15-8:45                               | TEFILLAH  |                   | TEFILLAH         | TEFILLAH - | TEFILLAH - CO-ED | Tefillah  |
| 8:45-9:15<br>What do I need to work on? | HOME ROOM (with adviser)<br><b>Check in with adviser about my plan for the week</b> |                   | HOME ROOM        | HOME ROOM  | HOME ROOM        | HOME ROOM |
| 9:15-10:15                              | <b>Read passage/ Chumash; write the questions</b>                                   | <b>9:45-10:30</b> | <b>Art class</b> |            |                  |           |

|                    |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|--------------------|--|--|--|--|--|--|
|                    | <b>and start working with my chevrotah</b>               |  |  |  |  |  |
| <b>10:15-10:30</b> | <b>BREAK/SNACK</b>                                       | <b>10:30-10:50</b>   | <b>Snack and ten minutes of exercise</b>                       |  |  |  |
| <b>10:30-11:00</b> | <b>Read JH text and work on the timeline</b>             | <b>10:50-11:30</b><br><b>Note: I ended up working only until 11:15. Did not need so much time... ☐</b> | <b>Work on the Toshba Assignment with R. Menda (need help)</b> |  |  |  |
| <b>11:00-11:10</b> | <b>Exercise for 10 minutes</b>                           | <b>11:30-12:00</b>   | <b>Work with Chevrotah a bit more</b>                          |  |  |  |
| <b>11:15-12:00</b> | <b>Work on my independent project with Tania and Ari</b> |  |  |  |  |  |
| <b>12:00</b>       | <b>Lunch!</b>  |  |  |  |  |  |

## Designing a “draft schedule” for the student

*Student's Name: Bat Ploni*

*Learning period: 2/6-17*

Goals:

### Chumash

- 1) Read Perek (or a text chunk, relevant to the unit)
- 2) Write five questions about this passage. At least one of the questions should reflect a textual concern – grammar, choice of words, word association...
- 3) Chevrutah – with your chevrutah you will share your understanding of the passage and together address the 10 combined questions. The questions and your notes should be documented on Google Doc.
- 4) With your chevrutah, you will write a 3-minute shiur to be delivered online.
- 5) Video your shiur and share it on Wikispace (or any other online portfolio program we would have created.)
- 6) Work on a **Dvar Torah** on this week's parasha – you can work with other students, from different grades (guidelines would have been given)

*If relevant – this could be a place where students have a choice of several “assessments”.*

### Hebrew

- 1) **Read and record** the passage from Chumash. Upload it to your portfolio.
- 2) **Identify** 7-10 verbs in this passage.
- 3) **Conjugate** these verbs in the past tense.
- 4) **Write** a story using these verbs in the past tense.
- 5) **Read** a chapter of “your book” (whatever Hebrew/Israeli literature students are reading at the time)
- 6) **Listen to/watch** two Chadashot Ha'Aretz, from two different media channels, and write two summaries to be published in the next OHDS-Chadashot
- 7) Choose an Israeli **song** to be added to the Israel trip repertoire.

### Jewish History – Period of 1/6-1/17/2014

Based on the following websites...

1. Create a timeline of World War II – with 20-25 entries
2. Choose a map from that time period that particular interests you. Enlarge the map using the grid scale and explain why you chose that particular map.
3. Read the biographical chapter available on Schoology (or whatever other form)
4. Rewrite her story but from the perspective of a non-Jewish neighbor. What would she/he have thought? Have seen? Have done?
5. Read at least 10 pages of your biography choice
6. Choose a news report that you would want to further investigate and write 2



- short paragraphs about it to be published in the next OHDS-Chadashot.
7. Continue working on your multi-media Genealogy Tree.

**Choice activities this week** (these will need to be approved by your adviser):

- History - Listening to the music the Jews living in German and Poland in the 1930's might have listened to
- Bishul - Cooking a Jewish Hungarian specialty
- Gan - Gardening
- Tanakh - Learning Parashat HaShavuah with a teacher in Israel on Skype (in Hebrew)
- Chessed - Supporting an elementary grade teacher
- Chessed - Designing a multi-media presentation about the WBBM to be shared with potential new families
- Omanut/Tefillah – Choose your next piece of Tefillah to work on
- PE – Exercise 10 minutes every day (in addition to your PE classes) - Guidelines provided by coach  
([http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/02/01/ten-minute-workout-short-intense-hiit\\_n\\_2599429.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/02/01/ten-minute-workout-short-intense-hiit_n_2599429.html))

**Chagim** (when relevant) - The WBBM will dedicate the following “x” days to Purim

- Halakhot, Mitzvot U'Minhagim
- History
- Text Study - Megillat Esther
- Toshba – Megillah
- Hebrew – In depth study of one Perek
- Omanut/Craft/Hands-on

**Tech** (See NETS standards to see what middle school students should be working on)

<http://www.iste.org/docs/pdfs/nets-s-standards.pdf?sfvrsn=2>

# The WBBM Manifesto

Students are avid learners and naturally curious beings, who deserve to be given the opportunity to explore their surroundings.

The connection between Teachers and Students reaches its optimum level when both sides believe that it is important to invest time and energy in developing a trusting relationship.

Judaism is not a subject matter, but a way of being, of thinking, of understanding one's relationship with G-d, other human beings and the world. As such, it should not be submitted to the limiting arbitrariness of grades. Could someone really fail Torah?

Every nation has a story. Every student has a story. Our students are part of a continuum. They need to be given the opportunity to explore their heritage, in all its wisdom, wealth and complexity.

The student's brain is not a disconnected and cacophonous set of musical notes, but a dynamic, multifaceted, alive, creative ensemble, filled with possibilities.

Our students are intelligent, invested and caring human beings. The WBBM will provide a forum where they can partner with each other and with educators in creating an environment where they can grow exponentially, following their interests and expanding their horizons.

Our educators are talented and passionate, caring and curious, and want to be present to offer the students not only academic guidance and mentorship, but become the spiritual counselors they can be, assuming the *de facto* role of "Mashgichim Ruchani'im" (spiritual counselors).

A place where students argue back and forth about their learning is a place where engagement is palpable. It is a place where the voice we hear is the voice of Torah - *Kol Torah*.

# The “WHAT IF...” Manifesto

- Students had the opportunity to demonstrate knowledge through capstone projects?
- Students would learn with peers and teachers sitting in New York, Israel or Paris?
- Students had the option to signal their willingness to speak Hebrew only that day?
- Students could work on one project the whole morning, without the arbitrary interruptions of the bell or the clock?
- Students could choose a topic and become “experts” in that topic of their choice?
- Students could engage with Judaism and Judaic studies without the anxiety of tests and quizzes, or of failing?
- Students could create their own set of she’elot and t’shuvot and write a five-page Tshuva?
- Students could develop through out their three years in middle school, a book of reflections and interpretations on Tefillat Shacharit?
- Students could create their own online shiurim to be shared on their student-created blog?
- Students ran OHDS learns together?
- Students had a Shabbat learn-a-ton within the local communities?
- Students would attend Limud conferences in San Francisco or Los Angeles?
- We could give our students the ability to learn how to use the Barylan CD and other tools, where they could immerse themselves in text study?
- Students could bring their parents in and lead their own parent/student conferences, articulating their successes and challenges?
- Students had to fulfill “x” amount of Chesed hours a year?
- Parents could just “pop in” and learn with their child and other middle school students?
- The WBBM became the center for Torah study in the area?
- We would give off one morning and say, “today we will have an evening Beit Midrash. Bring your parents, let’s learn together!”
- Parents generate the questions and they would come together with their children and explore the answers together, one evening a month, at the Beit Midrash?
- Students could conduct Judaism 101 classes for new parents or parents with limited Jewish background, but eager to learn more and more...
- Our students taught our new teachers about OHDS and about Judaism and Jewish calendar and what to expect, when? And what if they had to create the syllabus for this course?
- Eighth grade students prepare a virtual tour of Israel while in the trip, to be used as part of Tanakh and Jewish history classes in the following year?
- Students could “schmooze” with former OHDS students, faculty and families who have made aliyah?
- Students could give us a monthly debrief on the matzav in Eretz Yisrael - in Hebrew and/or English?

- Students could have a chevrotah with the slichim that went back to Israel?

## FAQs

### *How will students be able to build skills in a measurable way?*

There are standards and expectations in both academic and social-emotional areas.

Within the academic area, students will continue to work and develop their text study skills, their analytic skills

### *Will the JS program risk being “watered down”?*

### *How will teachers be able to respond to such large group of students?*

We have programmed within the WBBM meetings between teachers and students in several levels:

- Small group of students officially meets with content teacher once during learning period. (scheduled)
- Students are divided into “tribes/shvatim”, consisting of students in grades 6, 7, and 8. Each “shevet” has an assigned “mechanech”, who is responsible to “keep an eye” on the members of the shevet. The mechanech also officially meets with the Shvatim once during the learning period. (scheduled)
- Students meet with their mechanech one-on-one during the week, for check in.
- All teachers are present in the Beit Midrash on a more frequent basis that they have been in the current model.

### *Will students tend to choose the “easy way out” or the “easy tasks first”?*

We believe that when students have a voice and a choice in their learning, they tend to embrace it and seek their intellectual growth. Students are naturally thirsty for knowledge that is relevant, challenging and meaningful to them. Students are not interested in short cuts when they are engaged in work that feeds their curiosity, energizes their creativity, fosters relationship with others and ultimately, brings them academic success and content mastery.

### **How will you accommodate the child who needs a quiet space to work?**

While the Beit Midrash is designed to be an open space, where students can work independently, in chevrotah or within groups, alternative space will be provided for both needs for a quieter environment, as well as the need for meetings and discussions.

### **How will you differentiate around language – Hebrew?**

Hebrew will be the default language of the Beit Midrash. However, students who choose to work solely in Hebrew will be allowed to do so, by joining the Hebrew-only pods, available through out the duration of the Beit Midrash. Students can walk in and out of those pods as they see fit. Additionally, the study of content areas such as Chumash, Jewish History or Toshba will be also available in English for those students who are either new to OHDS, have had a parallel entry into the program or might need extra support in Hebrew but are competent and independent learners in English.

### **I understand how this can work for your motivated student, but how will this work for the students who are not necessarily intrinsically motivated?**

As mentioned earlier, we believe every student, every human being is intrinsically motivated to learn. The WBBM will provide students with the opportunity to explore topics of interest, to search for the relevance of their Jewish studies in their lives, to research and

to delve into areas that stimulate their curiosity and quenches their thirst for genuine intellectual inquiry.

### **What would homework look like in this context?**

Students will be encouraged to develop independence and ownership for their learning. The ultimate goal of the WBBM is to create an environment where learning is fluid, where the student's curiosity and engagement is not limited to or compartmentalized within the walls of the school. Homework is part of the journey. We believe that students will be motivated to read about their topic of interest, to speak to people and interview others about their questions. The learning should be an osmotic experience between school and home and within each individual student.

### **How do you manage an open classroom of many students with different maturity levels?**

### **What are the changes students will see on a daily basis?**

Students will meet in one large room. They will be responsible for their own time. They will be able to budget how much time they need to give a particular subject. They will have a set amount of "credits" to fulfill within the Core Curriculum. They will have the opportunity to develop their expertise in topics of their choice. They will work within a "shevet" and will have one mechanech who is directly responsible for them. At the beginning of the two-week learning period, each student will receive an updated plan of action for the current learning period.

### **How will students be evaluated on their performance?**

Students' work will continue to be assessed, evaluated and feedback will continue to be given. Students will be responsible for producing quality work on both – core curriculum

and in their areas of interest. Students will develop a portfolio through out the year and through out their middle school journey. The portfolio will reflect the students' growth, in both skills and content.

### **How will you know if the program is successful? How will you evaluate the success?**

We have planned several layers of ongoing assessment of the WBBM:

- Students will have the opportunity to fill out a daily reflection (see “link”) on their overall engagement within the Beit Midrash
- Teachers will be assigned the role of “anthropologists” – educators will rotate in the position of observer, logging information on student engagement, student-teacher relationship, and overall atmosphere of the WBBM
- Students will have the opportunity to assess the WBBM through periodic feedback protocols
- Educators involved in the Beit Midrash will hold a daily meeting to reflect on the success and challenges of the program