**Machshava Beit Midrash**

**Goal:**

To provide a focused learning environment of personal learning, deep reflection, mindfulness, and inspiration to promote emotional, psychological, and spiritual well being.

**Underlying Vision**

Students today are busy, often overwhelmed, and increasingly stressed at school. The Machshava Beit Midrash is a learning environment where students are able to choose from a number of different philosophical and thought provoking books to learn alone or together with a chavruta. In addition, inspirational video and mindfulness training stations allow students to settle and better take control of their thoughts, creating a spiritual and meaningful atmosphere that hopefully permeates beyond the walls of the classroom.

As an educator I have seen the intensity of my students’ schedules and hectic lives up close. With the fast paced school day, quickly moving between periods, rarely do students have an opportunity within the school environment to fully collect themselves, their thoughts, and process ideas and meaning at a slower, more individualized pace.

At the same time, many students understanding of Torah learning is limited to the classes that are traditionally scheduled: Tanach, Gemara and Halacha. I have discovered that many students are unaware of the rich literature of Jewish philosophy and ethics, the *why* as opposed to the *what* and *how.* The exposure to these works, and the purposeful reflection built into the program allows students to not only learn new material but ask themselves: “how does this learning apply and affect my lives, not only in the here and now, but when I *leave* this classroom as well.”

**Explanation of the Name**

The name Machshava Beit Midrash actually has a double meaning. On the one hand, it is a place where we encounter different works of Jewish philosophy and inspiration, commonly referred to as Sifrei *Machshava*. At the same time, the goal behind the program is to both relax and ultimately take control over our *machshavot*, our often scattered, disorganized thoughts. This is achieved by creating a more individualized, peaceful learning environment that promotes student autonomy, personal reflection, and mindfulness meditation techniques that the students can draw from even after our official class concludes.

**Part 1: Classroom Structure**

**a. Seating**

The desks are arranged in pods. Many students though have used the opportunity to sit on the floor, often in the corners of the room. The hope is to purchase a few items such as a small carpet rug to provide an even more comfortable, spiritually conducive atmosphere.

**b. Sifrei Machshava Collection**

A sizeable collection of sifrei machshava in English are made available at the front of the room. Students are given full autonomy to select a book that speaks to them. They may learn alone or with a partner. Students can choose to read the same book each week or sample different writings, the decision is entirely up to them.

 Going forward, I plan to start printing out articles to target specific student interests. Although the books have been popular for many groups, some students would benefit from something more specific and concrete, that they could finish during that week’s session, to enable the students to feel like they walked away with something tangible.

**c. Mindfulness Meditation Station**

Two chromebooks are place in the back corner of the room where there is a special space for more independent, private work. These chromebooks are set up with 2 different websites: calm.com and The Honest Guys channel on YouTube. Both provide free, guided meditations with the accompaniment of the student’s choice of background sceneries and calming music.

**d. Inspirational Video Station**

 On the far right side of the classroom we have three chrome books set up with an inspirational videos playlist. The playlist is made up of videos that I put together that include videos and audio recordings from a number of different sources. I am in the process of collecting student feedback with the hope of ultimately enabling the students to add videos that they have found personally meaningful and inspiring.

**e. Music**

We play soft Jewish and instrumental music during Machshava Beit Midrash. At this point the students enjoy it, but depending on the class, some students may find it distracting.

**f. Social Worker Joint Programming**

In setting up the Machshava Beit Midrash I had a number of conversations with our school’s social worker (Judi) to help create the ideal learning environment. My hope is to run a joint program with Judi once every 2 months on topics related to stress and resiliency.

 Currently we have collaborated on a joint program to discuss the busy state of the mind and how purposefully slowing down and becoming more mindful, allows us to both relax and control our thoughts. Judi presented on mindfulness and stress, and each student created their own “mindfulness jars” which both represented the concept taught and can be used both to create a state of mindfulness and serve as a relaxation technique.

**Part 2: Purposeful Reflection**

There are a number of elements to Machshava Beit Midrash that allows for deepening understanding and real life application to the student’s lives.

**a. The “Inspo” Board**

Inspired directly from the students, the “Inspo board” is designed and continually updated by a group of students. When a student finds a quote that they find personally meaningful, they write it on a piece of paper and hand it to one of the students in charge of the board. These students prepare the quote in a more aesthetically pleasing way, adding a drawing that relates to the quote.

**b. Pair and Share**

Students typically learn, watch videos, or meditate for 25-30 minutes. While learning, the students are encouraged to highlight at least one element of their learning that they found personally meaningful and/or applicable to their lives. At approximately the 30-minute mark, students join another group and each shares a specific element of their learning with each other. Every other week, we gather everyone together and each combined group shares either their own idea or one they learned from the chavruta group that joined them (we switch back and forth).

**c. Journaling**

While students are learning they are encouraged to jot down notes, ideas, and any free flowing thought that they would like to remember. Each student is given a personal journal that they can use to record their thoughts and ideas. On the front page of the journal, I have placed the 4 prompts that Rabbi Aryeh ben David described in his book, Becoming a Soulful Educator. These can serve as prompts for the students to focus their writing. I am also hoping, at times, to *start* the MBM with a 5-minute free flowing writing exercise to get the students into the mindset of “heartful” learning.

**Part 3: Frequently Asked Questions**

**1) How often do you run this program?**

I currently run Machshava Beit Midrash one full class period a week. It has quickly become one of the most anticipated and popular programs that we run in class. I think that there is room to extend it beyond once a week, but at this stage I want to maintain the “specialness” factor and excitement that the program has generated thus far.

**2) What age/grade is this program intended for?**

This year I launched it with a class of 9th and 10th grade students that learn in a combined class. I feel confident that I could use it with older students as well. I haven’t tried running the program for Junior High students yet, primarily because I have found it difficult to find age-appropriate, meaningful Jewish books for that age group (someone should start publishing…) I hope to try and do a sample run in my 7th grade class with articles and videos sometime later this year.

**3) Aren’t you a Tanach or Gemara teacher? Isn’t a program like this off-track? What does it have to do with your course of study? How do you afford the time?**

This is the number one question, complaint, and concern that I get when I describe the program to friends and colleagues. I typically answer as follows: As a Judaic studies teacher, my number one goal is not quantity of content. It is creating meaningful learning that will impact each individual student *ba’asher hu sham*- where they are right now. I want to create lasting learning experiences that permeate beyond the walls of my classroom and influence each student’s day-to-day life. To that extent, giving the student the autonomy to choose what they want to learn, even for just one period a week, is incredibly empowering. I believe the respect that such a program expresses to the students, as well as the deep, personal learning opportunity that it creates, develops an overall culture of meaning and purpose, and that Torah learning is not only facts and information, but wisdom that should be internalized and made personal. This is something that I believe, if done well, will filtrate down and impact the success of future Gemara, Halacha and Tanach classes going forward.

 In addition, although I have used this opportunity to focus on sifrei machshava, other teachers-perhaps in schools that do not give teachers the same flexibility- could use it to focus on more homogenous topics to their regular class. For examples, a teacher could bring in different books or articles on various *halachik* topics, where the students could choose an area of interest in halacha that they do not necessarily get an opportunity to look into. Maybe the teacher provides Tanachs for the entire class and lets them explore any area they want for 20 minutes. They can choose to focus on one sefer or switch to random areas week in and week out. I think teachers would be amazed at how students appreciate these opportunities for autonomous learning, and coupled with purposeful reflection-such as journaling, pair and sharing, and group discussion- can give our students an entirely different appreciation for the study of Torah.

**4) Don’t we already teach machshava/philosophical/ethical ideas within the context of our regular class?**

Yes, absolutely. However the Machshava Beit Midrash is meant to stem from the students, and be more direct and focused. Students in the Machshava Beit Midrash are exposed to books and parts of Jewish learning that they simply did not know existed. Instead of “slipping in” how the content is relevant to the student’s lives at the end of a class (if at all) the Machshava Beit Midrash strives to foster passion in student learning specifically because *they* are choosing the content. As much as we are able to inspire within our classroom, it is always with the thought that we know what it best for the students to learn. And often we are correct. The Machshava Beit Midrash though starts from the opposite perspective: what do students want to learn? What topics interest them? And then it builds from there.

**5) Do the students actually take advantage of the program? Is learning really going on? Or are they just enjoying the free time?**

Of course it is impossible to speak for every student. And speaking honestly, I am sure that some students simply appreciate the ability to breathe and take a step away from the intensity of a typical school week. From my observations over the few months since we launched Machshava Beit Midrash, I would say that upwards of 85-90% of the students are actively engaged in learning or meditating and visibly appreciating the experience that this learning environment provides.

 My biggest challenge with the last 10-15% is finding level-appropriate content. For some of these students, even the “lighter” books that I have brought in are too challenging for them. They are looking for something shorter, more personally meaningful, and concrete. For some, the idea of reading an entire book, is simply too intimidating. For these students I am finding that the video/ audio playlist has been a successful substitute. Students that would be hesitant to pick up a book on Jewish philosophy are open to watching a video or a presentation. I am also in the process, as I mentioned above, of speaking with each individual student about tailoring the material I provide, to even better meet each student’s individual needs. My hope is to make articles and audio/visual clips accessible that are even more closely tapped into student’s individual interests.

[https://youtu.be/3WroNOdTT2o](https://youtu.be/3WroNOdTT2o%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)

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