

## Personal Reflection on the Real-World Learning of the Bamidbar Value Letter Project:

How might we build an ideal community? That was our essential question throughout our year of learning *Sefer Bamidbar* together. My seventh grade girls reiterated this question over the course of our learning. By the end of the year, a class favorite iteration of the question was *what does an ideal community value and how do we, striving to be members of an ideal community, act upon these values?*

Sounds like a big question for an emerging teen... or at least that's what I thought when we set out to learn *Bamidbar*. But my students, as they so often do, surprised me. *Perek* after *perek*, unit after unit, and value after value, they demonstrated a deep understanding of every value we learned. It was as if they had already learned it all before.

When we learned about the value of making every member of the community feel counted (by the literal counting of *Bnei Yisrael* at the beginning of the *sefer* as well as the detailed donations of the *nesiim* during *Chanukat HaMishkan*), students exchanged thoughtful smiles and told me how they make sure to decorate the locker of each girl in the grade for her birthday. When we learned about Miriam's infamous episode of *l'shon hara* and how careful we need to be with *shmirat halashon* even when our intentions are pure, students shared over and over again how careful their parents are to guide them when they vent about a challenging day. When we learned about Korach's influence on the neighboring *Shevet Reuven* and took an actionable stance against "*oy l'rasha, oy l'shcheino*" by evaluating our seat choices for *tefilla*, students proudly shared how much their parents emphasize the importance of surrounding oneself with positive influences and not succumbing to negative peer pressure. When learning about *Mei Meriva* and the notion that sometimes words speak louder than actions and sometimes actions speak louder than words, students shared how their parents go out of their way to show them and tell them that they love them.

For all of my hopes as a teacher to help my students learn something new, I was even more inspired to see how the values of *Sefer Bamidbar* were already so deeply woven into my students' very *neshamot*. At various points in the year, I asked students individually how it could be that they had already mastered an understanding of and appreciation for values of a *sefer* they had never learned in depth before. Each and every student attributed this to her parent/s. "I know it because I live with people who are role models of these values; they've always been," I recall one girl sharing (barely concealing the "duh" tone of how obvious this felt to her).

This is what drove the *Bamidbar* final (see attached assignment). Students wrote value letters of gratitude to their parents. They focused on which values of *Sefer Bamidbar* they already know how to live by because of the example their parents had set for them at home. As far as their parents knew, a traditional final exam was scheduled for the day this project was due. This was a top secret project that students worked on over a week, carefully supporting their ideas with quotes and examples from the text and commentary of *Bamidbar*. They went through draft after draft of their letters, regularly running ideas by their peers and conferencing with me for guidance.

Meanwhile...

I reached out to parents to write value letters to their daughters (see attached letter to parents). I told them that I would be giving each daughter the letter from her parent/s as soon as she handed in her *Bamidbar* final. I expressed my hope that their letters would help emphasize to their daughters what our learning in *Chumash* was truly about. I asked them to “Please write a values letter to your daughter sharing with her the fundamental things that you value in your home and how each of those values are reflected in an observable way in your family community.” Why? “*Bamidbar* has taught us all about the values of an ideal community. The homes that you have built for you daughters, your family communities, reflect and are built upon your values.” I also reached out to Rabbi Chaim Hagler, our school principal, to write a values letter to the class about the fundamental values upon which our school community was and continues to be built. Finally, I wrote my own letter (attached) to the students, sharing with them the values that I hope they experienced in our classroom community.

You can imagine the love and thoughtfulness that went to each of the letters described above. Parents shared over and over again how challenging it was for them to articulate the fundamental values of their home but that, despite or perhaps because of the challenge, it was one of the most deeply meaningful things they had ever done for their daughter and for themselves. On a personal level, writing my letter to the students gave me a profound opportunity to reflect upon my own pedagogical practice and to what degree I was mindfully seeing each of my core values through to fruition in our classroom experience.

The letter writing process was uniquely rewarding for the students as well. While our learning throughout the year was guided by our essential questions about the values of an ideal community, this particular surveying and reflection of the totality of *Bamidbar* in a way that added even more meaning. Students made connections within the narrative, noticed patterns in the messages and themes of particular commentators, and fine-tuned their understanding of the *sefer* in general. They eagerly scanned and revisited sources, carefully searching for the perfect examples to support their ideas. I think much of this motivation to work through the material came from a fond nostalgic feeling of reconnecting to the sources they had worked so hard to understand over the course of the school year. The whole process of revisiting the year’s learning was done through the lens of actionable *hakarot hatov*. Active expression of gratitude has been proven to increase feelings of happiness and optimism<sup>1</sup>. Imagine that! A middle schooler spending finals season engaged in something to increase feelings of happiness and optimism!

Beyond the content, skills, and values of our particular classroom, students also developed the real-world skill of iterating a letter. Most of a tween’s correspondence is immediate: texts, e-mails, and neon post it notes. Rarely do they take *time* to thoughtfully consider their words to another person. For over a week they thoughtfully wove together these letters to their parents. They edited their work for more than technical mistakes; they reconsidered their language to ensure that it articulated precisely the message they wished to express in a way that their particular intended audience would be most receptive to it. This important skill of letter iteration is important to develop in the lead up to real-world experiences such

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<sup>1</sup> (to list just one, for example) Watkins, P. C., Woodward, K., Stone, T., & Kolts, R. L. (2003, January 1). GRATITUDE AND HAPPINESS: DEVELOPMENT OF A MEASURE OF GRATITUDE, AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING. *Social Behavior and Personality: An International Journal*, 31(5), 431-451. doi:<https://doi.org/10.2224/sbp.2003.31.5.431>

as applying to high school, college, summer jobs, and, ultimately, careers. Even more fundamentally, developing the critical skill of recognizing the good that others afford us and bestow upon us is a real-world skill that this project especially nurtured.

Imagine the pride and relief of these girls as they handed in the letters they had worked so hard on for their parents. Many took the time to decorate the envelopes and add other personal touches. They were surprised when I immediately handed their work back to them saying simply, "I already worked with you so much on this. I know that it's ready to go straight to your parents." Each student was even more surprised when I handed her letter for her parents back with an additional envelope addressed to her. Confused and curious, each girl opened her envelope to find a letter from Rabbi Hagler, a letter from me and, finally, a letter from her parent/s. It's moments like that I wish I could bottle up and treasure forever.

Girls cried as they read touching messages about the most essential values of their families. Girls laughed as they realized that they wrote about nearly the exact same values in their letters to their parents as their parents had chosen to write to them about. They held the three letters close and said things like, "I can't believe all of these people care this much about me." There were, to be completely open, a few students whose immediate reaction was something along the lines of, "WHAT!?! Does this mean that our letters aren't really a surprise to our parents!?! Do they know that this is coming?!?" I reassured them that their letters to their parents were still a surprise. Another couple of students cynically noted as they read their letters, "I KNEW IT! I knew my parents were up to something!" You gotta love these kids.

This was one of the most rewarding projects I have ever done with my students. I would encourage any class in which values are taught expressly (which, I like to hope is all of them) to make a point of reflecting upon the values learned in class in the context of *hakarot hatov*. I could see this project working well in any *Tanakh* or literature class. This could even work for a social studies class. And, without question, I could see this being a perfect fit for a *Pirkei Avot* class.

It should be noted that the most challenging part of this project for me was tracking down parents who hadn't submitted letters. It took more time than I was prepared to devote to this to e-mail parents individually, and call them (sometimes multiple times). Was it worth it? Absolutely. Would I do this whole project again? In a heartbeat. But I would be careful to leave myself more time to take care of the parent letters.

In conclusion, the values driven learning of *Bamidbar* throughout the year had already encouraged application of our content and skills beyond the classroom to the real-world. This project helped my students see and experience that our learning was a part of their real-world all along.