

Personal Reflection on the Real-World Learning for Letters of Admiration:

A famous *breitah* is brought in Megilla 14: “*Nevuah she’hutzrecha l’dorot nichteiva*,” in other words, all *nevuot* that we have record of from the past were written down for us because they are relevant *l’dorot*, for generations. Connecting the academic learning of *Navi* in a classroom to the real-world should be easy then, right? If everything we learn in *Navi* class is profoundly relevant to our specific generation and time, then *Navi* is one big PBL unit, isn’t it?

One of my challenges teaching *Shmuel Aleph* a few years ago was that my students so enjoyed the narrative and were so engrossed by its characters that they were hardly interested in taking the time to make the text personal, to draw upon the text for its timely message to our generation. It feels a little silly to even complain about something like this, but they just loved *Sefer Shmuel* so much that they were missing out on a critical piece of authentic *limmud Navi*.

My inspiration for a solution came from my student Meira (last name withheld for privacy) in the throes of the battle of *perek 14*. *Perek 14* presents a fascinating contrast between the leadership of King Shaul and that of his son, Yonatan. In comparing Shaul’s seeming passivity and diplomacy to Yonatan’s refusal to rely upon miracles and, instead, taking a personally active role against the enemy, Meira made a connection. “One of my family’s favorite things to do at the Shabbos table is talk about what we’re reading,” she began. “My parents and older siblings are all reading ‘The Prime Ministers’ and it sounds like Shaul is David Ben Gurion and Yonatan is Menachem Begin.”

I was floored.

I, too, was in the middle of reading Yehuda Avner’s “The Prime Ministers.” The connection was so astute. I was blown away to the point where all I could do was smile, and run the implications of this connection through my head, and stare back wordlessly at my students. Finally, another student stepped in, “Okay, obviously whatever Meira just said was really interesting. Someone please explain.”

I watched like a fly on the wall as Meira recalled the various anecdotes about our former prime ministers that her family had shared. She then cited *pasuk* after *pasuk*, example after example from our very *perek* to help explain what in the narrative had driven her to draw the connection between these two ancient leaders and the two contemporary ones. *Nachat* is hardly a strong enough word to describe what I felt- not just at Meira’s insights but also at how receptive and fascinated the rest of the class was by her ideas.

This incident inspired our final project for *Shmuel Aleph*.

As June rolled in, students reflected on the entirety of the narrative that we had learned together over the course of the year. In *chavruta*, students brainstormed lists of all of the leaders we had encountered in *Sefer Shmuel*. We then reconvened and began compiling all of the lists into a master class list. Noteworthy points of discussion arose around figures such as Chana who may not have played a traditional leadership role in her own time but has, subsequently, served as the very role model for the way hundreds of generations of Jews have davened to Hashem

over time and across continents. Can a role model be a leader? Can someone be a leader without intending to be or having any awareness of playing such a role? The discussion continued with contributions to the list such as *Chofni* and *Pinchas*, the corrupt *cohanim* who abused their power as priests for personal gain. Can we consider someone a leader if they fail in this role? What about Achish? Is it okay to learn from enemy leaders? Would it even be okay, hypothetically speaking, to admire them?

These very questions, so rooted in the very text of *Shmuel*, helped us begin to take our learning from the leadership specifics of our *sefer* to a more ideological realm. It was, therefore, during our next class that I launched the final project. On the day of the project launch, students came into the classroom to find personal letters on each of their desks. I had written them each a letter highlighting a quality of theirs that I felt echoed a positive trait from one of our leader exemplars in *Shmuel*. In addition to simply drawing the connection, I cited an example of a time when the student demonstrated that quality in her learning. I also cited a textual example that reflected the quality of the leader in *Shmuel*.

After each student read her letter, I told them that the way I can recognize a good quality when I see one is because I associate it with good things I have experienced before. History works the same way. We have confidence in our modern-day leaders who exhibit qualities that reflect the tried and true qualities of leaders past. History can help inform our confidence and admiration of current leaders both big and small. I then distributed the challenge (see attached) which, in short, was to identify a particularly resonating leader in *Sefer Shmuel*, identify and textually support specific qualities of that leader, and to then write a letter of recognition to a modern-day leader who, too, exemplified these qualities.

The project took off immediately.

Students wrote to Prime Minister Netanyahu, recognizing his specific qualities that reflect those of David *HaMelech*. They wrote to Racheli Fraenkel of the inspiration they drew from the parallels of her story to Chana's in *Sefer Shmuel*. One student, also inspired by Chana, wrote to her great-grandmother and expressed her admiration for her family's commitment to perpetuate the generations for the sake of an everlasting relationship with Hashem. Another wrote to Vice-President Biden and, *al kiddush Hashem*, praised the way he leads despite the likelihood of never really taking over just as Yonatan did. Students wrote to our school principal, Rabbi Chaim Hagler. They wrote to teachers and mayors, parents and counselors, senators and celebrities. They drew upon the examples set forth in *Shmuel* of Achimelech the *Cohen*, Shaul *HaMelech*, Michal, and, of course, Shmuel (to name a few).

Their letters were full of thoughtful and supported connections to the text. They exemplified actionable learning according to the very dictum from *Massechet Megilla*, "*Nevuah she'hutzrecha l'dorot nichteva.*" Finally, and in a most meaningful of ways, my students were connecting the lessons of leadership from *Sefer Shmuel* to their very lives while still holding true to their strong interest in the narrative. Mastery of the text and narrative were necessary in order to apply these lessons. One student reflected after mailing the final draft of her letter, "*Navi* is really a guide for life." Another student remembered the Rambam from *Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah* that we learned earlier in the year and wrote, "If one of the criteria for becoming a *navi* is to be with the times and of the world

then of course it makes perfect sense that in order to really understand these *nevuot* we also have to be in touch with the world around us.” YES!

The thoughtfulness and attention to detail that went into this project by each and every student I think is most attributable to their working towards a real-world audience. Additionally, the voice-and-choice and openness of the project allowed for students to develop ideas and connect to figures that were personally meaningful to them.

I think that the idea of this project is replicable across many other academic subjects. Certainly, this project can be done with any other *Sefer Tanakh* that has leaders. But beyond the realm of Torah, students can write letters of recognition to modern day leaders that parallel the traits of-

- For history and social studies: former presidents, monarchs, first ladies, revolutionists, abolitionists, civil rights leaders, righteous gentiles, founders of famous organizations, etc.
- For science and math: famous mathematicians and theorists, pioneers of medicine, early leaders of the space program, etc.
- For literature: the protagonist of a novel
- For gym, health, and physical education: revolutionary athletes
- For *Talmud* or *halacha*: *tanaaim*, *amoraim*, *geonim*, *rishonim*, *achronim*, etc.
- Foreign language: a key figure of the nationality associated with that language, etc.

Something I would have done differently is to require students who finish their letters early to write another letter inspired by a different figure in *Shmuel* to a different modern leader. Since it was finals season, I just let students who finished their letters early prepare for their exams. This ended up derailing a lot of the work of the people still writing their letters and not much studying for finals ever took place. But it was after finals were over that the responses to the letters started coming in and I knew that despite this hiccup, the project had achieved its goal.

If only I had recorded the students’ reactions upon receiving replies from the people (or offices of the people) they wrote to. Every response marveled at the connection drawn from something as ancient as *Navi* to the modern day. The students expressed feeling like contributing to something so much larger than themselves which, as a few were eager to note, is a feeling we associate with a true leader. It is important to note that a big challenge of this project was that not all of the students received responses. Some got letters back weeks or months later. One has yet to receive a reply. I met with these students to help them process this let down particularly in light of the excitement buzzing about the students who did get letters back.

But the energy born of authentic engagement with Torah and the world it is meant to guide remained positive and strong even in the face of challenges. The student who never received a response beautifully summed up why: “Taking the time to pinpoint what I admire about someone and why, really why, I admire it, makes it easier to be aware of the qualities that I want to develop in myself. I think everyone has it in them to be a leader. I think that maybe even the Jewish people are a nation that Hashem chose to be the leader nation to the rest of the world. To figure out what our role in all of that is, we need to figure out who we connect to, why, and then how we can work on those *midot* in ourselves.”