



CHINUCH .O.A.C.H.

Connections, Outlook, Approaches for Classroom and Home



MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Aviva Werner

Mrs. Rochie Berkowitz credits Mrs. Barkin, her twelfth-grade *Chumash* teacher in Yavne High School, with igniting within her a love for learning Torah. “She taught *Chumash* with such love that you ended up loving it as well,” remembers Mrs. Berkowitz. “And when you love something so much, you don’t want to keep it to yourself. You just want to share it with everybody.”

And so, after seminary, Rochie went right back to her former high school as a teacher. Over the next 15 years, she taught a variety of subjects — *Navi*, *Chumash*, *Moadim* and *Megillah* — in seventh through twelfth grade. Because it was her school and the community in which she grew up, she saw herself in every one of her students and sought opportunities to connect with the girls as much as possible in and out of the classroom.

As extracurricular opportunities opened up in the school, Mrs. Berkowitz eagerly took on new roles. She was student council coordinator, directed the annual school productions, and worked on fundraising with the girls. She was also the ninth-grade *mechaneches*. “Working with the girls outside the classroom builds relationships,” she explains, “and then you’re able to accomplish so much more *in class*. They’re

FROM THE FIELD

Mrs. Rochie Berkowitz

- ▶ Principal, Chaviva High School for Girls, Cleveland, OH (2018-present)
- ▶ Teacher (*Chumash, Megillah*), Chaviva High School for Girls, Cleveland, OH (2018-present)
- ▶ Student council coordinator, Yavne High School, Cleveland, OH (2013-2018)
- ▶ Ninth-grade *mechaneches*, Yavne High School, (2014-2018)
- ▶ Director of annual school productions, Yavne High School, Cleveland, OH (2008-2017)
- ▶ Teacher (*limudei kodesh*), Yavne High School, Cleveland, OH (2003-2018)
- ▶ Recipient, JECC Ratner Goldberg Teacher of the Year Award, Cleveland, OH (2015)
- ▶ Teachers Training Certification, Yavne Seminary, Cleveland, OH
- ▶ B.A., Maimonides College
- ▶ Teachers Training Certification, Ateres Bnos Yerushalayim

more readily *mekabel* from you when you have that relationship.”

As her relationship with students blossomed, so did her passion for *chinuch*. “I think I started teaching because of my love for Torah and teaching Torah,” she shares, “but over the years, my love for students is what made my teaching even more fulfilling. It became much more meaningful. I wasn’t just teaching Torah; I was teaching Torah to people I loved.”

Another thing she loves is Cleveland, the community in which she was born and raised. As Cleveland itself was growing in population, Mrs. Berkowitz saw a need for a new girls’ school. She opened Chaviva High School with an eye toward the ever-evolving needs of today’s teenagers and their twenty-first-century *nisyonos*.

“Times are changing so rapidly,” she explains, “that it’s becoming a challenge for us in *chinuch* to be able to not just keep up with the change but really get ahead of the curve. That’s something most schools are struggling with. I was finding that a lot of our students were solid, good girls, really *temimusdig* and sincere, who wanted to connect to Torah as more than just an academic subject. They were *machshiv Torah*, but it was staying kind of cerebral. So while the Torah never changes, how we teach that Torah has to develop with the changing times.”

Mrs. Berkowitz established her school’s educational philosophy on the *passuk* “*V’yadata hayom v’hasheivosa el levavecha*.” It’s a two-step motto, she explains. First is the “*v’yadata hayom*” part — the *yediah* itself — which must be relevant to the students today (*hayom*). “It can be from

Yirmiyahu thousands of years ago,” says Mrs. Berkowitz, “but it has to be in a language and with a perspective that is pertinent to today.”

But it can't stop there, leaving the knowledge as an academic subject on the cerebral level of tests, quizzes and homework alone. The lessons must impact students on a deeper, personal level, she says. That's the next step of “*v'hasheivosa el levavecha*.” “It can't just be something that stays in our mind, that you write answers on a test and are done with it,” stresses Mrs. Berkowitz. “It has to be something that guides us and directs us for our life. That will only happen if it's something that becomes emotionally absorbed and inculcated on a real *neshamah* level.”

Take, for example, a lesson in *Chumash* about Yaakov Avinu and his dream of the *sulam*. Mrs. Berkowitz first teaches the *meforshim* — the *Rashis*, *Kli Yakars*, and so on — so that students understand the basics of the text and its challenges. The next step is to show students how this *parashah* affects them personally, even though they are not Yaakov Avinu, they didn't dream about ladders, and they aren't escaping their brother who wants to kill them.

“We talk about *she'ifos*,” says Mrs. Berkowitz, “and about how you're never going to accomplish anything if you don't have a dream. *Ein davar ha'omed bifnei haratzon*. What is your *ratzon*? What are you looking to accomplish? How are you going to get there? What *middos* do you need to cultivate in order to achieve those goals?”

“And then we have a whole project about creating our own ladders. What are some things we need to get to our goal? We need patience, *emunah*, support, we need to *daven*. And then we discuss what things hold us back. Being lazy, being scared, fear of failure, etc.”

Mrs. Berkowitz takes the same approach when teaching Avraham Avinu's *nisyonos*, ensuring that the age-old words of the Torah will be relevant to today's teens. First students learn through the *Rambans*, *Ohr Hachayims*, and other *meforshim* to get a solid understanding of the *inyan*. Then they delve deeper by thinking about their own personal

nisyonos. How do they feel when they have a *nisayon*? Do they feel like Hashem is mad at them? Do they feel like Hashem is leaving them? Or maybe it's Hashem pushing them, telling them they can do more?

“We approach *Chumash* as more than just stories,” continues Mrs. Berkowitz, “because that's not what it's meant to be. These *inyanim* are meant to be the guidebook for our life. The goal is to have the girls connect with their learning on a personal level so it stays with them far beyond that test. It's about the ultimate test of life and what they learn should be something they're able to incorporate into their daily lives and their decision-making in the future.”

Despite the extra focus on reflection, group discussion and projects, Mrs. Berkowitz's class moves through its curriculum at a speed comparable to that of other schools. Part of this is because Chaviva's *limudei kodesh* class periods are an hour long, resulting in more class time than in other schools.

Nothing is cut out to accommodate the longer classes; instead, the schedule is arranged differently. There are only six class periods per day. General studies classes are scheduled in 1 ½-hour time slots every other day. Math, for example, might meet on Mondays and Wednesdays, while History is only on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

There are four *kodesh* class periods each day—*Chumash*, *Navi*, *Kesuvim* and *Halachah*. *Chumash* class combines *bekius* and *b'iyun*. *Navi* covers both *Neviim Rishonim* and *Acharonim*. And in *Kesuvim* class, students learn *Tehillim*, *Megillos* and *Mishlei*. *Parashah* is taught *shiur*-style every Friday. *Biur tefillah* and other *hashkafah* topics like *tznius* and *emunah* are taught on Sundays in a more informal setting.

In addition, *Historia* is presented in “immersion weeks” at the end of each term, when the focus is on a historical time period for a full day or two, and as part of the elective curriculum. Other elective offerings include personal wellness, performing arts, leadership, speech and debate,



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and more. There's also physical education twice a week.

"It's amazing what you can cover when you take a step back and look at your eight and a half hours of learning each day for four years," says Mrs. Berkowitz. "We have found that simplifying the schedule allows us to learn more in a less fragmented way."

Mrs. Berkowitz's students are also able to move through their *Chumash* curriculum at a speed comparable to that of other schools, also thanks to Mrs. Berkowitz's efforts in training them how to prepare on their own outside of class time.

"Our job really is to teach them how to learn so that they have the skills themselves," she says. "They will often have to prepare a *perek* on their own so I don't spend the time in class teaching it. I quickly review it with them to make sure they have all the right information."

Chaviva also has an option for an honors track within

the same class. An honors student in Mrs. Berkowitz' class will have extra requirements and extra *meforshim* to prepare on her own, for example. This isn't busy work, but learning targeted at making Torah meaningful and relevant to each and every student. The point is also, and primarily, to challenge students on their individual level.

How does she choose which *inyanim* in *Chumash* to delve into more deeply? "I focus on the *perakim* that are going to hit home for the students I have in my class this year. Next year, I'll have different students, so I might focus on different *perakim*. It's about being flexible, knowing your material but also the girls sitting in your class and being able to work the class around the students that you have."

After all, "it's not just about teaching information," Mrs. Berkowitz says, "it's about creating people. It's about working with them on a personal, individual level to bring out their *gadlus*."

I think success is that there's constant growth. I don't think that there's ever a finish line that you reach. I don't think that success can be measured with a grade or even with graduation. I feel we are successful if our students are motivated to constantly become better, accept direction, and feel capable to meet life's challenges as a means to come closer to Hashem. That, to me, is success, and it's going to look different with every single student, every single week, every single year.

How would you define success in your work?

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"Like arrows in the hand of a warrior" (*Tehillim* 127). An arrow travels in an arc — in a curve pulled by gravity as it flies. The archer, when he aims the arrow, must therefore set it on a course that is higher than its intended goal. In the same way, when educating our children, we must aim higher than we can perhaps realistically expect them to attain, in order for them to reach the actual target that we are hoping they will achieve.

— Rav Hirsch on *Tehillim*