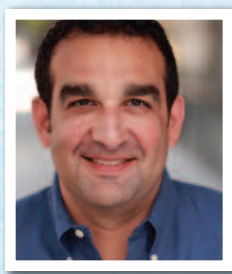




SERIES:
CONVERSATIONS IN TIME:
PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

As we enter the spring of our 15th year at Ben Porat Yosef, we feel it appropriate to revisit the climate, culture and, most importantly, the people who have made the school what it is today. We hope that this interview will be the first in a series that will enrich and enlighten others about the unique circumstances that surrounded the founding of our school, as well as highlight the significance of what BPY contributes to the world of Jewish education today and the implications for the future.

Innovation in Education: The Creation of Ben Porat Yosef



STEVEN SARAO

*Interview by Cheryl Rosenberg,
President of Ben Porat Yosef,
with Steven Sarao,
Visionary and Founding President of
Ben Porat Yosef*

C: What were some of the factors that made you want to start BPY?

S: When I was coming back to religious practice and observance, I was learning one-on-one with a very warm, passionate and loving Sephardic rabbi in Chicago. They had a similar--but different--initiative in Chicago. So, my early learning in Jewish thought and practice was juxtaposed with forming a day school. When I subsequently moved back to New York City and began my family life, it was sort of in the back of my mind and in my thinking to create something similar. But, this particular region has many more opportunities within Jewish education because the Jewish community is so large. In coming back and really diving into the issues in Jewish day schools, it became apparent that in addition to beginning a school that would support Sephardic continuity, there were other very specific areas within Jewish education that families were not happy about and that graduates of day schools felt were missing. For me, this was an indication of strong opportunities for growth and improvement within the field of Jewish education.

C: What were the areas that you sought to improve?

S: First and foremost, fluency in Hebrew language--a comfort in Hebrew language, fully and completely. Throughout many of our early discussions we had to really push our case for improvement because the community felt it was doing a sufficient job with regard to Hebrew. In addition to Hebrew, there also seemed to be a tremendous amount of conversation about what was a very structured, rigid approach to Jewish education in day schools. Many day school graduates spoke about being forced to participate in tefillah during their educational years and just having no idea where they were in their siddur--what they were doing, what they were saying, why they were saying it. One story in particular was of a school that would lock the bathroom doors and shut off the lights to prevent kids from escaping to the bathrooms during tefillah. The stories were comical but sad.

There seemed to be a very deep disconnect between heart, mind, and practice. So, as we began to form and to sift through these ideas of Sephardic continuity, of sincere Hebrew immersion--much of it had to do with doing things in a more heartfelt, honest way than had been done before. It was certainly my goal to bring back to the Jewish community what Rabbi Marc Angel refers to in his

books: the concept of the whole man, encouraging and cultivating a fuller range of human attributes--the ideas that Sephardim have traditionally used to try to balance the requirements of observance with the requirements of living in order to achieve a form of religious expression that is both balanced and proportionate. This ideology is a gift, not just for Sephardim but for the entire Jewish community. Unfortunately, during the early discussions with Jewish leadership, many times Sephardic practice and expression was thought to be achieved by merely wearing “funny hats” or a school serving falafel (true story!). There was a very troubling lack of knowledge about both history and experience that did not allow for the community to benefit from varied approaches to Judaism and education.



Article about Ben Porat Yosef's opening from the Bergen Record, 2002

C: What is it about Sephardic continuity that made that a primary focus of the school?

S: I think there were two distinct issues that we were grappling with. One, first and foremost, was that throughout the US, simply based upon the numbers, Sephardic kids were being educated in Ashkenazic day schools and for the most part were praying in Ashkenazic synagogues, and many of the parents of older Sephardic children had had personal experiences where their children would come home and see their parents or

grandparents do something according to a particular *minhag* or tradition, and their kids would tell them “you’re not doing that in the right way; we learned in school that that’s not how you say the blessing; you’re not supposed to do it that way.” So, I think there was a disconnect between true Sephardic practice and what was being taught in day schools. This type of reaction towards anything outside of the “norm” seemed especially problematic as we contemplated our ability to demonstrate to our children how to treat the acceptance of anything new, anything exciting or anything that might allow us to peek inside why we do things the way we do. Although I believe it was

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unintentional, there was a tremendous historical legacy of the Sephardic community being kept outside of the complete picture of what I would hope would be a more fully-developed curriculum that represents a complete Jewish perspective.

I felt that we couldn’t allow the Jewish community to lose something so valuable. The fundamental truth is that Ashkenazic practice, thought and custom is not at risk, it’s the default perspective for the Jewish people. It is found in every community and in every school. The power and perspective of Sephardic thought and practice, however, is most certainly at risk of being lost, and is important to the entire Jewish community, not just to Sephardic families. It’s important for all of us, because it speaks to the diversity of the Jewish people; it speaks to a complete picture of our historical experience; it speaks to us being sent out of a variety of different countries throughout our various periods of history, which has made us who we are as a people. Sephardic continuity, in BPY thinking, was never limited to Sephardic families. Sephardic continuity is beneficial for everybody because it adds to a richness of heritage that is valuable to *Klal Yisrael*.

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Article about Ben Porat Yosef's Hebrew immersion program from the Jewish Standard, October 20, 2006.

C: What conversations did you have when you were conceptualizing BPY?

S: At the beginning, I had conversations with anybody who would have a conversation with me. I made attempts, mind you, to have conversations with Jewish leaders--in Englewood, in New York City, on the university level--with the people who were leading initiatives to train teachers--because I needed resources. I needed subject-matter experts in a variety of different and complex areas.

As I spoke about during [BPY's first eighth grade graduation address in June of 2014](#), a majority of Jewish leaders at that time were not supportive of our perspectives on Hebrew immersion. They didn't feel that it was something that could be accomplished, mostly because for the first time we were having a discussion about what the true challenges were with Hebrew immersion and observance and religious life. At that particular time in history, in the Jewish world in this particular geographic area, at least according to these Jewish leaders, the majority of the people who had the skillset to teach Hebrew immersion were not the same people who had the skillset in terms of religious thought or religious practice. And, the people who had subject-matter expertise in religious thought and religious practice were generally not fluent in Hebrew.

BPY was suggesting that it could be done better-- that parents wanted it better, that students wanted it better, and even that educators wanted it better

So, according to the leadership that existed in the tri-state area, BPY's vision in terms of Hebrew immersion was not achievable. Regardless of our desire to make it happen, they didn't feel it was a project worthy of their attention. But, I continued to try to talk to everybody and anybody that would give me an audience. Ultimately, our advocacy on Hebrew immersion provided a tremendous amount of traction for us and positioned us as both an innovator and disrupter in the field, carving out a market for parents looking for improved Jewish education.

I would later learn that established institutions often subscribe to a philosophy that Clayton Christensen describes as "if it ain't broke, don't fix it," while not really questioning whether "it" is "broke." I believe that in many ways BPY was challenging traditional day school thinking and suggesting that some things were broken. At the time, that was a very difficult thing to suggest, particularly to the Jewish community about Jewish education. BPY was suggesting that it could be done better--that parents wanted it better, that students wanted it better, and even that educators wanted it better.

C: So, where did the support ultimately come from?

S: Well, initially there were probably about a half a dozen to a dozen families who at that time were members of the Sephardic community in Englewood where we had begun to get some traction. In terms of developing our ideas, I was also having on-going conversations with Rabbi Michael Azose in Chicago, Rabbi Aryeh Greenberg (who came up with the name Ben Porat Yosef) who at that time was in Seattle, Washington, and Rabbi David Bassous who was in Highland Park--so there was a lot of rabbinical leadership with whom I was in contact. Rabbi Bassous, Enrique Levy, and I actually

filed the papers for the institution after we had the support of around eleven families. As we moved forward, of those eleven families in Englewood, some people moved out of the area and some people moved onto other projects--as with any startup organization. Eventually, those eleven cooked down to six core founders — six of the most passionate people who worked for years to make BPY a reality: Dr. Rochelle Moche, Solomon and Shirley Bitton, Enrique Levy, Rabbi David Bassous, and I. Those core six dug even deeper and we were the people who continued to work on the project—on BPY—until we opened in 2001.



All the students and staff of BPY in 2003; today the school educates nearly 500 students.

C: How did it feel when BPY finally opened?

S: It's very hard to remember anything beyond the shock and awe of actually opening our doors. I remember walking into what was then a small synagogue in Leonia, where we had two classrooms and single office. It was all very warm, intimate and seemed like a home away from home. Everyone knew each teacher and each child. When a child got sick and stayed home, the classroom called and wished them well. We stood together as a family, celebrating together and sometimes mourning loss together.

Many current families won't recall Judy Sinai, of blessed memory, the first president of BPY's Parent Teacher Organization. When I first asked Judy to serve, I remember her response: "Steven, it isn't about giving you the time that I have to give, it's about giving you the time that I don't have to give."

The early years had so many emotions: special, loving, difficult and inspiring. We worked together as a community and built something we hoped would last...these core family values still exist within the framework of BPY even as we grow.

She was an inspiration and a leader during our initial opening. The early years had so many emotions: special, loving, difficult and inspiring. We worked together as a community and built something we hoped would last. We pulled together during 9/11 and weathered the tragedy together. I believe those core family values still exist within the framework of BPY even as we grow.

I also remember walking into the school and wondering what the one or two bulletin boards that we had would have displayed. What did the kids work on at BPY? Whatever the children created felt

like what we, the BPY community, had created. Every piece of artwork was tremendously special. We must maintain the kindness and tolerance, the warmth and compassion, and the drive to experience what is happening in the BPY classroom. We must remain committed to those ideals even amidst the largeness of success. We still have bulletin boards, and we still have the individual accomplishments of our students. We cannot allow success to alter BPY's warm embrace and drive towards educational values.

C: You have spoken before about a Sephardic approach to the world and education—what do you see in BPY today that speaks to the founding approach?

S: There is an aspect of BPY that is extremely tolerant and accepting of individual differences. There is a quality of the BPY family that embraces the unique, the individual journey, above an overly-structured common-denominator approach. And for me, looking back historically over the experiences of the Sephardic community—in the 14th and 15th centuries—this was a community that was side by side with Christians, with Muslims, and even internally within its own community, there were families who were on a variety of different religious levels. These were Jews who honored tradition but weren't solely focused on making everything and everyone more and more strict in practice.

Part of this approach is to [pray with conviction and passion](#), to be accepting of all Jews, to understand that Judaism is to make our lives happier and better, not more confining. It was always an approach that was accepting of one's neighbor. And, in the U.S., because of different types of reforms that have happened, that ideology, I think, has largely been lost. There has been a lack of true and sincere tolerance and warmth towards one another, Jewish and non-Jewish.



"Avraham" and "Sarah" welcoming BPY early childhood students into their tent - an annual BPY tradition.

The Jewish community continues to be challenged by a need to divide within itself and reinvent sub-sets of Judaism. Diversity has been a reality within the Sephardic community since its inception. You have always had within the Sephardic community people who were more observant and people who were less observant. The Sephardic community, distinct from the Ashkenazic community—and, I'm speaking historically, not necessarily present-day—was always more tolerant of the inclusion of everyone under one roof. We shouldn't constantly have to divide ourselves. We should be open and allow a tolerant, accepting, possibly "Sephardic" mindset—a Sephardic umbrella—to be warm and welcoming towards anybody who wants to be with us.

As Rabbi Marc Angel explains, "although Sephardic sages produced classic works of ethics and moral guidance, these works did not engender a religious life based on guilt...God was a loving parent...God was forgiving, compassionate, kind." This holds true whether you're more religious, whether you're less religious, whether you're open, whether you're not open, whether you're progressive, whether you're not progressive.

So, to me, BPY truly speaks to that in a very sincere way, and can provide a framework for a much more tolerant, much more accepting way of living our lives within a Jewish framework.

Steven Sarao is the visionary and founding president of Ben Porat Yosef (BPY), a Jewish day school in Paramus, New Jersey. Steven has been employed by the New York City Police Department (NYPD) since 2003 and is currently a Lieutenant assigned to the Office of Management Analysis and Planning (OMAP) where he develops and manages public policy. Steven holds a bachelor of fine arts from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts and most recently completed a masters in public administration at Harvard's Kennedy School. Steven serves on Bronx Community Board 8 and is a member of its Economic Development, Land Use, and Traffic & Transportation committees. His published works have appeared in Harvard's Public Policy Journal, Harvard Africa Policy Journal and American Police Beat magazine. Steven resides in Riverdale, NY with his three children who attend BPY and the Ramaz Upper School.