

# Families Tour School's New Space

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*Second-grader Esti Polotsky of Teaneck enjoys learning Torah with her grandmother, Anna Polotsky. COURTESY BEN PORAT YOSEF*

Grandparents, siblings, and other “special guests” got a glimpse of Ben Porat Yosef’s new Paramus campus during a Chanukah event at the coed Orthodox yeshiva day school.

About 500 adults joined students in classroom games and lessons on Chanukah topics. Together they made crafts, watched a light show, listened to the first-to-third-grade choir perform, wrote letters to Israeli soldiers, and danced and sang.

The intergenerational event culminated a week of activities at the school, which at present has 130 students in preschool to third grade. A school-wide scavenger hunt and life-size comic-strip presentation of the Chanukah story — both done exclusively in Hebrew — were run by the Israeli National Service women (B’not Sherut) who help provide an environment of Hebrew-language immersion for students in all grades.

“My son had the greatest time and it was such a moving experience for me,” said Fair Lawn parent Vera Ptashny. Her second-grader enjoyed having his maternal grandparents, Tamara and Nick Soyfer of Fair Lawn, and his aunt and uncle from Montreal, visit him at school.

According to Jessica Kohn, early childhood director at the seven-year-old school, the event also served as a follow-up to the dedication of the new space in October. Formerly housed at Cong. Sons of Israel in Leonia, BPY now shares the former Frisch School building with Bat Torah Academy–The Alisa M. Flatow Yeshiva High School.

The move heralded the school's evolving mission. Originally subtitled "The Sephardic Yeshiva of Bergen County," BPY still is the only area school teaching the unique customs of Middle Eastern, North African, and Balkan Jews, but it no longer uses that tagline.

The shift was a matter of demographics, Kohn said. "At least 80 percent of our families are Ashkenazic. The founders wanted a school where their customs and traditions would be addressed, but BPY was never meant to be just for Sephardic children."

Rabbi Tomer Ronen, rosh hayeshiva, added that the school's focus on both traditions came to fill a gap in understanding. "Our community needs to be educated to understand each other's cultures in order to enrich their own. We teach the beauty of both sets of minhagim [customs]."

Torah texts are taught to first-graders with their ta'amei hamikra, the cantillation (trope) marks readers follow in synagogue. The Sephardic trope is taught in first grade, because it is easier to learn, while the Ashkenazic trope is to be taught in fifth grade. Mishna, the collection of oral biblical interpretations that serves as the basis of the Talmud, is taught in third grade — a grade or two younger than in most day schools — using music and drama. "The kids are always walking through the hallways singing what they've learned," said Kohn, who is also a parent in the school.

Stanley Fischman, the director of general studies, said the effort to increase the school's public presence was greatly helped by the Grandparents Day program.

"We want our families to see for themselves — and get the message out — that we are a community yeshiva to children of all backgrounds," he said. "The wide range of activities reflected the kinds of things our children are exposed to here."

Hebrew immersion is an integral part of the school's approach. In addition to the two B'not Sherut, who speak Hebrew with kids in all grades and prepare special projects, BPY has on staff Rabbi Shachar and Lian Shalom, a visiting Israeli couple who teach Judaic studies, entirely in Hebrew, to the upper grades.

Because they hear Hebrew at such an early stage of life, said Ronen, the students understand it by the time they are in third grade. "Recently we had a teacher from our partner school in Nahariya visiting us," said Ronen, "and she had planned an easy Hebrew lesson and an English one. I told her not to use either, but to teach as she does in Israel. She did, and the children really understood her."

Parts of the Grandparents Day program were planned by the National Service women.

"My kids loved the show that was put on by the B'not Sherut," said Danielle Tamir of Englewood. She and her husband, Asaf, have a son in first grade and a daughter in pre-kindergarten. "Chanukah was a spectacular week. Parents came to bake sufganiyot [Chanukah doughnuts] and Moroccan doughnuts called sfinj. For me and for the kids, it was a whole week of celebration and they were really 'in' the holiday."

Teaneck parent Shoshana Glickman said her mother-in-law, Ilana Glickman, and two sisters-in-law found the program "meaningful and moving." Her children, in nursery, kindergarten, and first grade, were excited to show their relatives the large comic-strip panels in the gymnasium.

"We parents get to hear some of what goes on in school," said Tamir, "but it's very nice to be able to be a fly on the wall and really see what happens in the classroom."

Said Kohn: "The idea was to send a powerful message to our children by learning Torah with the generations that came before them. Seeing multiple generations together, learning and singing and dancing, was so beautiful."