

## Connecting BPY to a Vastly Connected World

Written by By Ruth Roth  
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Paramus—“How can we help our students stay connected?” That was a critical curricular question that Rav Tomer Ronen, *Rosh HaYeshiva* of Ben Porat Yosef, and his staff pondered last summer while preparing for this school year. They hired a director of educational technology, a one-to-one iPad program had been implemented, and there were Smartboards in all classrooms from kindergarten and up. But the educators were concerned about facilitating a different kind of connection for Ben Porat Yosef students, one that they considered vital, particularly for students living in the Internet age. They wondered how Ben Porat Yosef could help its students remain connected with their own

*neshamot*

and

*klal Yisrael*

, and teach

*ahavat*

*Hashem*

. It led them to introduce a new

*tefillah*

curriculum throughout the elementary and junior high schools.

Rav Ronen explained how *tefillah* fits into the school's educational philosophy.

“We are always trying to find ways to help our students be prepared for the future and what the world will expect of them. So, we work to help them learn to think and be creative, to be confident, and to embrace challenges, academic and otherwise. But, it also occurred to us that especially with the changing environment and expectations that our students will experience, as a yeshiva we also want to help them prepare their *neshamot* for adulthood, and to help them grow spiritually and develop

*ahavat*

*Hashem*

. We would like to ground them and help them find strength in their connection to

*Hashem*

and

*klal Yisrael*

.  
*Tefillah*

offers our students an extraordinary and beautiful gift that they will be able to draw on for the rest of their lives.”

The goals of the curriculum are threefold. First, students should experience comfort and joy through prayer. Second, students will understand the structure of *tefillah* as well as the meaning

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of the individual prayers. Finally, they will experience *tefillah* as an emotional tool to elevate their relationship with *Hashem*.

The curriculum, still being tweaked, and anticipated to last two years in duration, will include both grade-specific elements as well as a communal element where all students in the elementary and junior high school will focus together on a specific prayer each week. Consistent with BPY's pedagogical approach, it will be designed to encourage critical and creative thinking through emphasis on an inquiry-based approach along with sharing of ideas between teachers and students. Students will be encouraged, as with all subjects, to ask their "why" questions to assist them in gaining a personal sense of what *tefillah* means to them emotionally and spiritually.

Rav Pinchas Yarhi, a member of BPY's Judaic studies faculty and architect of the program, believes that students can best understand a relationship with *Hashem* by relating to other relationships in their lives.

"A person's behavior during *tefillah* is a strong metaphor for how the person relates to the world. When you see people who have *kavana* and concentration during *tefillah*, you can feel certain that they will pay attention to the feelings of others. If people are disrespectful during *tefillah*, you may wonder whether they will be respectful of others in their daily lives. So, teaching our students about *tefillah* will help them with all of their relationships; they will understand about *avodah* and *hodaah*, and how to relate to *Hashem* and also to people in their lives."

All grades will include a strong focus on the spirit of *tefillah* along with *halacha*, but age appropriate objectives will also be set for each grade. First and second graders, for example,

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will begin to learn about the concept of

*avodah*

and relating to

*Hashem*

in the context of basic relationships. These youngest students will discuss with their teachers how they converse and interact with parents and friends, how they ask for things and how they apologize for wrongdoings to the important people in their lives. Older students will participate in discussions about more complex philosophical underpinnings of

*tefillah*

. In all grades teachers will encourage students to ask questions and share their own interpretations in order to help them gain a deeper understanding of ways to connect with

*Hashem*

and their own feelings through prayer. On a weekly basis, teachers will share with each other what has been most effective in engaging students in

*tefillah*

in their classrooms.

Program highlights will prominently feature music, with the students learning a variety of *nuscha ot*. In

this way, BPY students will be knowledgeable about various traditions, Ashkenazic and Sephardic, and will be comfortable with all types of

*tefillah*

. Inspirational speakers will visit with the students (currently planned for six visitors throughout the year) to discuss various elements of

*tefillah*

and spirituality. In addition, a family element will be included, as children will be encouraged to brainstorm with their parents on

*Shabbat*

regarding what things they think would be important to add to their

*tefillah*

, e.g., what to thank

*Hashem*

for. The school's objective is, as much as possible, to make the learning experiential, to engage the students intellectually and emotionally, and to involve the students' families as well in order to help students realize that a relationship with

*Hashem*

encompasses the entirety of their lives.

Parents are embracing this enhanced aspect of the BPY curriculum. Moshe Cohn, parent of two BPY students (K, second grade), expressed, "Speaking as a *ba'al tefillah* for over 20 years, I know that fluency with the language and meaning of our liturgy is necessary but insufficient; the *tefillah*

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needs to travel from the heart and lips to somewhere else. Directing

*tefillah*

*inward*

, the self-reflection that accompanies our daily meditations, is something that children can learn to do early on. This can foster the ability to disconnect from all things material, and experience the touch of the Divine within ourselves. I look forward to seeing my children learning this from their teachers, and reinforcing it at home.”

Mordy Rosenberg, parent of three BPY students (Pre-K, K, and second grade), offered, “The fundamental goal of Judaism is to foster an intimate relationship between man and his/her Creator. The foundation of any relationship is simply communicating, and *tefillah* offers a daily opportunity to talk to God. We have always wanted a school that opens our children’s eyes to the beauty of the Torah and

*mitzvot*

. So, we are thrilled that BPY has made the children’s connection with

*Hashem*

through

*tefillah*

a pillar of its Judaic studies curriculum and we look forward to learning along with the BPY students! ”

Through the process of rolling out the *tefillah* curriculum this first time, the BPY staff hopes to develop a workbook for teachers, complete with small assignments with grade-appropriate goals, activities, and any multi-media projects that could be enhanced as it is utilized. To continually develop the program and assess its efficacy, a series of measurements will be incorporated as well that will include surveys of the students and teachers and interviews with graduating 8<sup>th</sup> grade students among other tools. This project is being generously funded in partnership with the Murray and Sydell Rosenberg Foundation.