

Feb. 23, 2014

Dear Mary, I am very much looking forward to speaking with you tomorrow morning at 11 am. We were all blown away by your well-researched and beautifully written article about our Holocaust Torah. You really captured the emotional impact as well as providing such detailed information.

We were also thrilled to see your article on Feb. 13 on virtual classrooms at Pascack Hills High, because it featured our own Temple Emanuel of the Pascack Valley Religious School graduate and congregant Alexa Hirschberg, of course, but also because we are using some cutting-edge technology in our synagogue religious school, including a weekly online course for grade 7.

Normally synagogue religious schools are well behind the curve in incorporating educational innovations. They are part-time and tend to meet on Sundays and on weekdays after school. In this case, we are proud and excited to be leading rather than following. Indeed, since some of our current 7th graders will be attending schools in the Pascack Valley Regional High School District, they will already be familiar with online classes from our Religious School! Students are "plugged in" all the time, socially and academically. Communicating and doing research online is like breathing for them. This is not the wave of the future -- this is NOW.

Here is some background information about our four technology projects:

1. Our online course for 7th grade:

This semester, we piloted a weekly synchronous (real time) online course with two teachers from Israel for 6 weeks for our 7th graders on the subject of the Shoah (Holocaust) and Israel. For that course, most of our students participate from home. They also do some independent work which they post for their teachers and classmates at their convenience between online class sessions.

The online course is highly interactive -- both the types of exercises they do during and in between each session and the constant give-and-take among the students and their teachers during the class. Written and spoken chats, Lino Boards, Google Docs, and videos are just a few of the tools they use. Our students' experience during the pilot confirmed what the research is showing -- that surprisingly, students are participating, learning and retaining more from their online class. Some students who don't usually speak in class are among the strongest participants online, and all of the students appreciate the opportunity to express themselves in a different way. Last week the students and parents voted overwhelmingly to extend this course to the end of the year. (Please see attached course outline and instructor's bio. For more information, see jetsisrael.com.) Students had the opportunity to meet and study with their

instructor in person at Temple Emanuel PV when she was in the area two weeks ago, on Monday, Feb. 10.

I am forwarding one of Smadar's follow-up emails to students and parents with links to the recording of a session and some of the mid-week exercises in case you would like to see them.

The students do see each other in person on a different day once a week at Temple Emanuel of the Pascack Valley with their "on-site" teacher. That teacher, Gilat Epstein, teaches complementary lessons on the Shoah and Israel. She is also a professional artist and leads a weekly Judaic arts class in the 7th grade. Students have produced stunning works of art. This is obviously a case where in-person interaction is especially important.

Even more exciting, I am working with local principals through our Principals' Council to offer this same course next year for 7th graders from all the local synagogues schools (Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist). As a result, students will be able to choose the day of the week that best suits them for this course. This, together with being able to watch a recording of a live class they have missed AND having class even when there is a snow day (which happened for us two weeks ago), will reduce absenteeism, as we have already seen during our pilot.

We hope to offer a course for local 8th graders as well next year so they can continue studying together.

2. Last summer, our School Administrator, Margie Shore, and I participated with other area congregational religious school principals in an intensive 10 week online course in educational technology made possible by a grant through the Jewish Federation of Northern NJ. This is how we were introduced to Smadar Goldstein of JetsIsrael, now the creator and instructor of our online course for the 7th grade. Since that time, three of our faculty members have attended workshops with Smadar when she was in the States. One of these is now taking her 10 week course, thanks again to the Federation.

3. Grade 4 Tablet Pilot

Here is a video about our pilot:

<http://youtu.be/9KSjQknPhRE>

The Religious School of Temple Emanuel of the Pascack Valley (Woodcliff Lake, NJ) was selected to participate in an innovative pilot program incorporating technology as a tool for learning. In November, each 4th grade student received a *Google* tablet to use in class and at home. This program has proved highly successful in engaging students and parents in Israeli schools. Our local initiative was developed by the Kehillah Partnership; is supported

by Contentnet, a prominent Israeli technology firm; and is funded by private donors. Program creator, Harold Benus, says; “Utilizing contemporary interactive technology, we can blend classroom and home learning sessions that capture the imaginations of students and engage families like never before. The tablets are fun, enable differentiated learning, and allow teachers to track individual student progress precisely.” Rabbi Kniaz, Director of Congregational Education at Temple Emanuel adds; “We are always looking for ways to enhance our students’ education. We are thrilled to be able to benefit from this program as we contribute to the field of Jewish education.”

The tablets were “loaded” with content of our choosing and the 4th grade teachers continue to add content and be trained in their use. The tablets have a “closed system” so they are completely secure. The pilot program includes full technical support, training and consulting. Students will continue to use the tablets through 7th grade and will keep them. The pilot program will be assessed at the end of this year.

Our students are now using the tablets almost exclusively both in school and at home for Hebrew, and they are using them more and more for Judaics. We are still working out kinks and learning, but we are very happy with the results so far and anticipate a very successful year.

Similarly to the online course, I am spearheading an effort by our local principals' council to take part in an expanded pilot with the tablets for the community as a whole. If this effort is successful, TE will be able to continue beyond this year and other local synagogue religious schools will benefit as well. This expanded pilot will be replicable in other communities around the country and will be watched closely nationally.

4. SmartBoards

Our school has three SmartBoards through a generous grant from the Legacy Heritage Foundation. They are in use whenever school is in session. The teachers who use them most also participated and are participating in the workshops and online course described above (#2)

I look forward to speaking with you tomorrow,

Rabbi Kniaz