

“What word did we learn for this symbol?” I asked, spreading my hands out to the sides and stamping my feet. I back up to make sure the students can see me clearly across the camera. “I see a hand up over there in the Old City of Jerusalem” I exclaim, indicating a student in a row near the wall in Vancouver. Rivka answers “ושמני הארץ – the wealth of the land, meaning lots of food and blessing!” [Bereshit 27:28]

I am teaching our weekly video conferencing sessions, sponsored by The Lookstein Center, from my home studio in Jerusalem, as I have been doing for the past seven years to the fourth grade at VTT. I have developed a repertoire of skills that I use to engage the students so that the screen they view me from becomes the indicator for what to do next, instead of a lecture type environment. To keep them engaged and ‘on the ball,’ we play charades and Simon Says with our Chumash vocabulary words, act out Biblical skits I write for them, work in groups and partners, elect leaders, and divide the class into different regions of Israel. One row is the Old City of Jerusalem, the back row is Southern Israel, the center rows are Central Israel, and the second side represents Northern Israel.

Dividing the room in this way has four purposes:

1. Provides constant reminder of my location in Israel, and makes them feel, even in a small way, that they are part and parcel of the land.
2. Keeps them attentive: I call on different rows for different functions, so best to stay attentive so they know what to do!
3. Lets them get to know Israel.
4. Helps me remember their names in a form of a seating plan!

In addition to their ‘Israel seats,’ each student must bring in a photo of something exciting in Israel in their ‘region’ and share it with their class. They show the photo to their classmates and explain what went on in ancient, as well as modern, times. For example, I showed them a photo of the Jordan River and explained that in the book of Joshua, the Jewish people crossed the Jordan River to enter the Land of Israel for the very first time. Every summer, my family – and millions of other citizens and tourists – go rafting down the Jordan River and have a ball. Tzipora shared Ir David, the Biblical Royal City of David and Zeev taught us about the ancient and modern city of Katzrin in Northern Israel. Parents, please help your child in Morah David’s 4th grade class prepare these short, special presentations, which bring a little bit of Israel closer to their hearts.

After winter break, I will be teaching Morah Etti’s 4th grade class, and I look forward to implementing the project with them.

After sharing sites in Israel, the class is dedicated to highlighting themes of their Chumash lessons. The past few weeks we have been studying the blessing Isaac bestowed upon Jacob, when he impersonated his brother Esav in the book of Genesis. The words of the blessing have both surface and deep meanings. One of the phrases, “הווי גביר לאחריך (Bereshit 27:29)”, I taught as being a leader, from the word גיבור giber, or hero, to your brother. I often ask the students to come up with their own symbols or charades to act out. The student personifying Jacob that day began to lead his brother ‘Esav’ round the room, like the game ‘following the leader.’ I was touched by this interpretation. Many translators of this verse assume the words ‘gvir leachecha’ to mean to be dominant over one’s brother, that Jacob would be superior to Esav. After my explanation, and the ‘follow the leader’ action that resulted, I was confident that my VTT video conferencing students will remember that Jacob can and must find ways to lead and be a leader. Each week, I marvel at the ability society provides us with – that with the use of technology - students discover new connections between 2000 year old text and modern life. I am looking forward to continued discoveries with my young leaders at VTT.

Please contact me at Smadar@jetsisrael.com with any comments or questions.

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