WHAT IS PROJECT BASED LEARNING (PBL)?

Project Based Learning is a teaching strategy that enriches student learning through inquiry. It begins with a driving question—an authentic query about a meaningful topic for students—and it ends with learners presenting the results of their work in a public forum, oftentimes in a venue other than the classroom. Because PBL gives students a voice in the learning process and capitalizes on their natural desire to learn, it holds special promise for Jewish education. When well implemented, project based learning activities will enable students to acquire a deeper understanding of and make personal connections to their Jewish heritage.

IMPLEMENTING PBL: SEVEN EASY STEPS

1. The teacher identifies a content area for the project, and goals and objectives to be achieved.
2. The teacher develops a driving question that not only is related to a real-world problem, but also has authentic meaning for the students.
3. With guidance from the teacher, students generate questions they must answer to solve the problem.
4. With input from students, the teacher creates a timeline for the project and communicates it to students and parents.
5. Students research answers to the questions, reading textbooks and newspapers, searching online resources, conducting interviews, taking field trips, etc. Learning happens at school and at home.
6. Teachers and students continually evaluate the learning process.
7. Students present their results in a public forum, such as an assembly, a museum exhibit, a newspaper article, or a webpage.

USING PBL FOR TEACHING JEWISH VALUES

Project based learning is an excellent tool for engaging your students in learning that has an authentic and meaningful purpose that will relate to their lives inside and outside of school. The planning process is outlined in a graphic organizer, which can be used as a template for future PBL plans.

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Note: Teachers need to prepare for the student inquiry process and might want to choose the presentation format before presenting the project idea to the class. Students must feel that the project is an authentic inquiry and not just another assignment. Consider using the Online Learning Center (http://www.behrmanhouse.com/bholc) where students can share research with group members, blog about issues related to the project, and even present the final project.

<table>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Project Title:</strong></th>
<th><em>Din V’rachamim – Justice and Mercy</em></th>
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<td><strong>Overview:</strong></td>
<td>Students will learn about the <em>middah</em> (Jewish virtue) of <em>din v’rachamim</em> – justice and mercy, from Jewish texts and from secular resources and represent their learning in an end project that will be shared with others.</td>
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| **Driving Question:** | *The driving question focuses the project from start to finish and should be relevant (authentic) to students’ lives.*  
How does the understanding of the *middah* of *din v’rachamim* – justice and mercy, from a Jewish perspective, guide decision making in both our public and private lives? |
| **Goal(s):**        | Students will study how this *middah* applies to dealing with others (*bayn adam l’chavero*), with ourselves (*bayn adam l’atzmo*) and with God (*bayn adam l’makom*) by exploring Jewish texts. Students will explore examples of justice and mercy in Jewish history, and in the secular modern world through research and guest speakers. Students will choose how to share this *middah* with others based on their learning. Possible end product ideas are included, though students and teachers may create other ideas that come directly from the students’ interest. |
| **Special Note:**   | As students study the *middah* of *din v’rachamim*, the teacher should guide them in choosing an end product that comes from their area of interest. |
| **Timing:**         | Number of learning sessions: 4 – 10 (depending on the amount of depth desired and the presentation format)  
Class time per session: 40 – 60 minutes |
| **Introduction to the study and project (creates a need for the learning)** | *The need for this study may come from a situation that the students have brought into the classroom, or it might be prompted by the teacher who has already stimulated the students’ need to know. It is important that students feel that this is an authentic project and commit themselves to it. A PBL is not an assignment from the teacher, though the inquiry will be guided by the teacher. The end product should be chosen by the students with guidance from the teacher during the inquiry process.*  
- Begin a study of justice and mercy in the bible by using Text Study #1. The teacher should lead the students to questioning the balance of justice and mercy in the situations that are known through the media or in their own lives, and the need to advocate for the balance of justice and mercy. |
The need for learning about *din v'rabanim* might arise from a situation in the school or perhaps in the news, where a balance of justice and mercy is needed. Students might be talking about this in class, and the teacher can use this interest to encourage further study or to develop the need to advocate for justice and mercy.

### Enduring Understanding

*Enduring Understanding is what we want students to take away at the end of the project and should be the focus of the learning.*

The *middah* of creating a balance of *din v'rabanim* guides our understanding of situations that occur in our personal lives and in the world around us.

### Learning Objectives and Student Inquiry

*When using PBL, learning is based on the students’ need to know. Teachers, however, must develop learning objectives in advance.*

Students will...

- Explore how the *middah* of *din v'rabanim* applies to dealing with others (*bayn adam l'chavero*), with ourselves (*bayn adam l'atmo*) and with God (*bayn adam l'makom*) from our Jewish sources.
- Apply the study of Jewish text to developing an understanding of the *middah* of *din v'rabanim*.
- Explore examples of *din v'rabanim* throughout Jewish history.
- Explore ways to understand the difficulties of applying justice and mercy in personal situations.
- Look at examples in the modern world that would benefit from a balance of justice and mercy.

The project begins with the students developing a list of questions that will guide their learning. For example:

- What is the meaning of justice?
- What is the meaning of mercy?
- Is God just?
- When has God shown mercy?
- Am I just and merciful in my dealing with others? How can I be better at using the middah of *din v'rabanim*?
- Are our leaders, (teachers, rabbis, leaders of countries, judges, etc.) past and present just and merciful?
- What should I do when I experience, see, hear or read about a situation that doesn’t represent the middah of *din v'rabanim*?

### Suggested Activities to promote the learning process

*The learning process is planned by the teacher with input from the students based on their questions (above). Possible learning activities:*

- Text study of Jewish sources related to justice and mercy, including examples of God’s use of justice and mercy.
- A visit from a rabbi to answer questions related to God’s usage of justice and mercy.
- Act out modern day scenarios related to the need for justice and mercy.
• Role playing being judges using justice and mercy.
• Create stories or comic strips related to scenes of justice and mercy (modern day, historic, biblical).
• Look at examples of justice and/or mercy (or the lack thereof) in the news. Present other solutions based on the understanding of justice and mercy from a Jewish perspective.

Resources for Student Study
The following resources are available to download and print at:

Getting Ready to Learn about Din v’rachamim: An introductory exercise to encourage students to explore their own thoughts and experiences with justice and mercy. Consider using the same or a similar worksheet at the end of the project to help assess student learning and thinking.

Two Text Studies: These guided studies asks students to explore the middah of din v’rachamim in dealing with others (bayn adam l’chaveri), with ourselves (bayn adam l’atzmo) and with God (bayn adam l’makom) in our Jewish sources.

Planning an Authentic End Product:
PBL end products must be authentic, and address a real need. End products should be presented in a venue beyond the classroom, if possible. It is important that the creation of the end product come from the students’ learning, guided by the teacher. A few end product ideas are suggested, but it is possible the students or teacher might suggest an alternative end product. It is important that the student work be validated, and not just an exercise for the sake of learning.

• Students collaborate (or create individual pieces) to create an artistic contribution that expresses their understanding of din v’rachamim and unveil this artwork to others in the synagogue or school community.
• Students become advocates to encourage leaders (congressional, presidential, local) to use din v’rachamim when making a decision in a case or situation that is of interest to the students. Students may advocate using social media, writing letters to the editor of a newspaper, writing to the appropriate leaders or perhaps speaking at an appropriate venue.
• Students put together a mock trial of either a biblical, historic or modern day situation that would benefit from din v’rachamim. The trial might be videotaped or presented in front of a live audience.

Reflection and Evaluation:
Students and teachers should engage in reflection and evaluation during the project and again when it’s completed.

Student Reflection and Evaluation:
• During the learning stages: How well am I working with my group
(helpfulness, sharing ideas, treating others with respect)? What do I plan to do next to help my group? What other information do we need to further our research?

- After the project: What did I learn about din v’rachamim? Why is din v’rachamim an important middah?

Teacher Reflection and Evaluation:

- During the project (with the purpose of providing students with feedback, and to adjust the project as needed): Rate students’ level of engagement and ability to work individually and in a group. Are the students learning the essential information about din v’rachamim? Will they be prepared to apply their learning to the end product?
- After the project: Looking back on the process, did the students demonstrate understanding of din v’rachamim? Did the end product reflect this knowledge? How well did the students work as a group? What would you do differently next time?