

A Library Grows in Brooklyn

Celebration of True Grit @ Day School Workshop

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Photos courtesy of BRIAN KATZ

“This isn’t a workshop,” coordinator **Leslie Monchar** declared. “This is a celebration. A *simcha*. Of a beautiful school library.” And, she added hopefully, “The heartwarming start of a new trend.”

This library of Yeshiva of Flatbush High School was the praised showpiece on Tuesday, May 21, at NYMA’s Day School Library Workshop. Hosted by **Rachail Kurtz** – Library Chair, Yeshiva of Flatbush High School – and **Brian Katz** – Yeshiva of Flatbush High School Librarian, its theme, “Creating a 21st Century Library at the Yeshiva of Flatbush High School,” was subtitled “If I am Not for Myself, Who will Advocate for Me? If I am Only for Myself, What Good am I? If Not Now, When?”

With many Jewish schools divesting themselves of librarians, and even libraries, viewing this duplex building with its student-friendly, tech-filled, outdoor and indoor areas, study spaces, conference rooms, gorgeous shelving and lighting, and – above all – a bounty of BOOKS was a treat. The dozen-plus attendees were further treated to a tour to see for themselves the transformation of academic space, the time and energy behind it, and the central role of a school library.

A New Face

The first speaker, **Rabbi Joseph Beyda** -- principal of Yeshiva of Flatbush, Joel Braverman High School – offered a brief history of the school, which was created in the 1950s. It was “groundbreaking in its day” – pool, gym, spacious hallway – and labeled the “blueprint for excellence.”

But in time, its age began to show. Rabbi Beyda’s own father, who attended back in 1961, walked in some 40 years later and declared, “The place hasn’t changed.”

The time had come for a facelift.

In 2008 the facelift began. Although interrupted by the recession, the library was renovated, its facilities upgraded.

When asked how he was able to convince the powers that be of the need for an upgraded library, Rabbi Beyda replied: by presenting the library as the strength of the school. The library offered not only collections and resources, but fulfilled four kinds of spaces:

- Sacred – synagogue and *beit midrash*.
- Reading – places for students to indulge in books.
- Meeting – rooms for clubs and conferences.
- Social – chances to simply schmooze and hang out.

“Students like to use the library,” he insisted. Well-designed, seamlessly integrated with the rest of the building, it conveyed the message and: “It is great to be part of this school.”

After countless meetings with head honchos and visits to other campuses for inspiration, the rabbi decided: the library must have natural light, not only to contribute to a stimulating environment but to emphasize Brooklyn’s natural settings. Indeed, sunlight poured through the broad windows facing Avenue J.

Brooklyn is not just urban, Rabbi Beyda stressed. “A tree grows there,” referring to the title of a classic novel.

Step by Step

Rachail elaborated on the steps behind the library’s renovation.

Product of the *Mad Men* era, Yeshiva of Flatbush reflected an austere, utilitarian look. Likewise, the early library fit the era’s concept of a school library: one large, but drab, room, with a large round table.

“Essentially there were two spaces,” she said, “Main room, and study room.” The third floor was the center of student activity.

During the incremental stages, Yeshiva of Flatbush purchased two properties. The auditorium was renovated, the pool converted to floor hockey. (“None of the students liked to swim,” Rachail explained.) The science wing was updated, as well.

Like Rabbi Breyda, Rachail promoted the vision of making the library the heart of the school. During the final planning, attention was paid to how the library would potentially be used. Competing with many distractions, today’s library must offer more than print. There are online databases and e-books, website, interlibrary loans, class lessons and orientations.

Administrative needs – circulation desk, offices, employee workspace – were considered. Where would books be shelved – or moved? What would be discarded? It took a good two years to move or weed out everything, find movers, and navigate new shelves and locations.

But in the end, the work was done. And -- voilà! A bright, spacious powerhouse filled with state-of-the-art student computers and printers, including state-of-the-art STEM equipment.

Library programming includes:

- Lunch and Lit Book Club
- Advanced Book Club
- Reading Championships
- Partner Reading with the YOF Middle Division
- Faculty Book Club

- Faculty Hebrew Book Club
- Bible classes
- Student mentors
- Partners in Reading
- Luncheons
- Book Day Program

The YOF library’s nearly 30,000 books straddle both Judaic and secular disciplines. In addition, the library offers extracurricular activities (i.e. college prep, varsity debate team). In Rachail’s eyes, the frequent overcrowding is actually a good sign: the students want to be there, and the library remains high profile.

“The library must be seen as a happening place, central to student life,” she declared.

Lunch periods are particularly busy. There are places for collaborative work as well as quiet study and reading. There is even a terrace for outside seating and eating. On the way to the library, patrons enter a long, wide corridor lined with white boards for student art and reach – of all things – a café in the commons. The result is a sleek, clean look and a seamless integration with the rest of the campus.

Rachail’s final PowerPoint slide flashed across the screen: *It’s alive!*

But no, not alive. Unlike Frankenstein’s monster, the library was never dead. Thanks to successful advocacy, a library in Brooklyn has blossomed and transformed. ■



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