



## A MAGNIFICENT JOURNEY: BEHIND THE SCENES AT BAIS YAAKOV'S EXHIBIT

by Chava Meth

As they say, a picture is worth a thousand words. When Rabbi Aharon Gross, Bais Yaakov's Director of Development, told me that the Bais Yaakov High School's parking lot was fuller than he'd ever seen it, I didn't doubt him, but I was still astounded when I saw it for myself. When I finally found an empty spot and crossed over to the high school building, it was as if I had entered a different world: a world of laughter, hard work, persistence, and friendship; a world where toothpicks, dice, and medicine bottles form breathtaking mosaics; a world where glue guns, staple guns, and black fab-

ric are the most precious of commodities.

Stepping gingerly through the halls, I stare in awe at the action: high schoolers gluing, taping, and sewing; fathers building, sawing, and measuring; mothers drawing, cutting, and stapling. It was if the entire Bais Yaakov family had converged to make this world called exhibit a reality.



What *is* an exhibit? I ask Chana Leba Lachman, an exhibit room head. Her answer is succinct but sums up the magnitude of the project: "We take the entire middle floor of our school and turn the classrooms into artistic displays of our theme." As a room head, Chana Leba is responsible for one classroom. First, she and her teammates



research their topic and break down the important events. Then, they brainstorm creative ways to display the information. What supplies to use? How many supplies to buy? Where to buy supplies? How to put it all together? These questions swirl around the room heads' brains for months, and when it is finally time to actualize their ideas, they have a room full of high schoolers to delegate the tasks to.

Adina Gross, another room head, concurs. "Being a room head is...a lot! It's amazing. It's stressful. Thank G-d, we have a partner! First, there's extensive research to plan the structure and design for your room to bring out the core points you want to represent."



This year's theme, Adina Gross tells me, is "Journeys through the Generations," tracing the history of the Jews through *Galus* and depicting their experiences in various countries. Each room displays a different country, outlining our nation's history in that region.

The research the girls do is thorough, and the lessons they glean are inspiring. Chana Leba, for example, extensively researched Jewish history in America, from the time it was a desert of Torah until its explosion into the thriving Jewish community of today. "It's amazing to trace the few individuals that held on and advocated Torah," she tells me.

Adina encountered a similar idea, though her experiences centered on a country halfway across the world. "Russian history is really dark," she begins. "We had a list of aspects to research, and one was our country's Golden Age. We came to the conclusion, however, that the Jews did not have one in Russia." It's not all sad and gloomy, though, says Adina. "It's incredible that we got to meet the rebbetzin of Moscow's current chief rabbi over Zoom. They came in 1989 when there was no one religious there. Now the community is thriving, with several shuls, kosher supermarkets, *tzniyus* clothing stores, kosher caterers, and Jewish schools. It shows you how through all years of suffering, we somehow still hold on. You would think Torah makes life hard, but no! We believe in it, we preserve it; it is the strength of the Jewish people." Adina explains that, as *frum* Jews who grew up with Torah as a given, we sometimes take it for granted. But researching Russia taught her that, after going through so many years of oppression, the fact that we are currently thriving is nothing short of a miracle.



This year's theme is astoundingly aporopos; the exhibit journey itself has encountered more twists and turns than ever before. What began last March, just days before the world went into lockdown, is finally culminating in a grand exhibition over a year later. With months of uncertainty for the world and our community, Bais Yaakov High School met its own unique challenges. "There were health concerns," Mrs. Elise Wolf, exhibit coordinator, says, explaining that they had to deal with masks and health forms and CDC guidelines, all part and par-

cel of the COVID reality.

"At the beginning," adds room head Penina Lieder, "they had to stagger all practice times. There were fewer people there at a time, so there was less *ru'ach*, and it also chopped working time in half."

Exhibit was originally planned for January but was delayed due to an uptick in cases at the school, and it was pushed off until May. "My co-head and I were quarantined left and right!" Adina told me. There was admittedly what Mrs. Wolf coins "exhibit fatigue" as the months wore on and as room heads had to juggle college and exhibit responsibilities. But at the end of the day, I can sense the enthusiasm and positive attitudes, and I wondered how the students were able to maintain the excitement.

"You see it slowly coming along," says Esty Waldbaum, a ninth grader. "Everything is tedious, but it builds up and gets more exciting. You see everything getting bigger and better, and it gets you excited." Rivky, her twelfth-grade sister, agrees. "Each project takes a lot of time and effort, but when you finish, it's really rewarding and you feel accomplished."

"Well, it's not that hard to keep it exciting because exhibit is quite the party!" ninth grade Ahuva\* tells me. "With the whole school coming together to work, there is always something happening."

Ahuva has hit a point I've been pondering as I explore the exhibit, marveling at the dice mosaic, the match project, and the life-sized boat structure. There's the ribbon mosaic the Waldbaum girls tell me about, which they have worked on tirelessly since November. There's Adina's room's match project that went through 12,000 (!!!) matches, burning and gluing them into a breathtaking picture. Exhibit, I see, is a project that is only possible with manpower, coordination, and teamwork, and I'm impressed at the tangible dedication, devotion, and *achdus*. I wonder if this is in fact Bais Yaakov's goal. Mrs. Wolf tells me she feels all the work is worth it. "Seeing the *achdus* and camaraderie and friendship – just the atmosphere of the school."



The exhibit idea was born back in 1995 when Baltimore hosted the Bais Yaakov Convention. "There were 270 girls in the high school, and it did not take so many girls to make a convention, so we decided

to do something to get everyone involved," says Mrs. Wolf. "The more people involved, the more successful it is. Here, no one stands out over everyone else. You see a magnificent finished production that focuses on the collective whole. You are looking at something that is produced for the *klal* by the *klal*, and the girls take such pride in it."

The pride is well-deserved, and I can't push the magnificence of exhibit out of my mind. The hugeness of this project, which Bais Yaakov undertakes every four years, is overwhelming. The heads admit they had no idea what they were getting themselves into when they signed up for the job. Says Adina, "The learning process is very difficult because you are thrown into a massive project. There is no guidebook; you have to figure out a lot on your own. You are going to fail a lot and make mistakes, but you learn from them."

"The best part is my girls," says Adina. "Our girls are amazing! They have such positive energy, simultaneously working hard and having a good time. The only reason we can come back and work on it for so many hours is because of the positive energy. That is the main point of exhibit! There is such a beauty to doing it together with the whole school and seeing the girls connect."

Chana Leba explains that exhibit is heavily reliant on creativity; it's the project ideas that make exhibit what it is, and that can get intense at times. "There is a whole room full of people! You see it happening! Ideas are turning into projects. The whole atmosphere is amazing; the entire community comes to help."

Esty and Rivky wholeheartedly agree, and they tell me that the best part of exhibit is definitely getting to know girls in other grades. "You're all doing the same thing, you end up shmoozing, and it is fun!"

I am starting to wonder if the process isn't much more important than the end result. Exhibit is a project of unity, hard work, and actualization. It's a journey of lessons and laughter. It's hard to describe what exhibit really is, and, as they say, a picture is worth a thousand words.

"So come check it out!" urge Adina and Chana Leba.

I agree – and guarantee that you are bound to walk away speechless and inspired.◆

\* pseudonym