

Local teacher makes virtual connections with students in Israel

Via video link, mentors help boost kids' English skills

By **MICHELE ALPERIN**

October 7, 2019, 11:38 am



Tibby Lapkin said that mentoring Israeli students "is one of the most meaningful things I do." Photo by Dara Munoz

Siby Lapkin of Monroe is a self-identified "ba'al teshuvah, a fierce Jew, and a Zionist." So when the retired teacher heard about Israel Connect, an independent nonprofit that pairs native English speakers in North America with Israeli eighth-, ninth-, and 10th-graders to improve their facility with English, she realized that the program's goals meshed perfectly with her professional experience and religious identity. And it didn't hurt that her son and seven of his eight children live in Israel.

According to the Israel Connect website, the program's mentors "give students the skills — and the confidence — to prepare for Israel's university entrance exams, which focus heavily on English proficiency." The organization assists Israeli Jewish and Arab students from schools in areas on the often-underserved Israeli "periphery," and Israel Connect selects the schools, working in cooperation with the Education Ministry. Mentors engage in weekly one-on-one meetings with students via video conferencing software, concentrating on English conversation, reading comprehension, and vocabulary development.

Lapkin works with students from a school in Ramla-Lod, a poor area where Israel Connect assigns mentors to students in five schools.

"Kids have the opportunity to be comfortable with English, and as somebody who has been studying Hebrew in an ulpan — that's an important component," Lapkin — a member of Chabad Jewish Center of Monroe and the Jewish Center of Princeton and president of the Alisa Hadassah chapter in Monroe — told NJJN.

Already having mentored five students, Lapkin talked about her experience working together with two post-bar mitzvah boys. One was on the autism spectrum; the other was “knowledgeable, advanced, and comfortable.” Both boys were highly motivated to improve their English. Although the weaker student was much less confident, the other boy often encouraged him. According to Lapkin, if the faltering student said, “I’m not doing this,” his study mate would say, “We’re doing this together.”

“What was neat about it is he didn’t experience pressure,” Lapkin said. “In the beginning, when he felt he didn’t know a word, the other boy would help him wonderfully, as did I, and he got much more able to be really involved.”

Israel Connect got its start about six years ago from an offhand comment by Sarah Gordon, its founding director and a Chabad emissary to Ottawa. Trained as a math teacher, she ended up teaching Jewish studies at a Chabad-affiliated day school in Ottawa.

A friend of hers who was teaching English in Israel told Gordon she was having difficulty getting her students up to par. Gordon told her what they needed were opportunities to talk with native speakers.

Gordon’s friend then asked her if she could find conversation partners for two students she had in mind, both with academic and behavioral issues. Gordon found two mentors, and both students thrived. Onto a good thing, her friend requested more mentors, and when other Israeli educators heard about the students’ progress, they in turn reached out to Gordon, asking “to hear about the program you run” — which wasn’t yet a program.

In 2013 Gordon left her teaching job but remained in Ottawa, where she focused on creating Israel Connect. The program started with 10 students and today serves 500.



Several Israeli students speak to their mentors from a classroom at school; students also connect with mentors at home. Photo courtesy Israel Connect

After they found that an off-the-shelf curriculum did not meet their needs, interested mentors and Gordon together created a curriculum based on a tour of Israel — it was, Gordon said, “as apolitical as possible.” Vocabulary and sentence structures are focused on what students need for the Bagrut English exam and the Psychometric Entrance Test for Israeli universities.

The curriculum includes “pretty sophisticated English descriptions of many of the tour spots as well as a background of different cities and places in Israel,” said Lapkin, who spent her career at Franklin K. Lane High School in Brooklyn as supervisor of communications and a teacher of theater and public speaking and English as a second language.

The Israel Connect sessions last 45 minutes. The student reads aloud the story, and Lapkin may go over pronunciation, vocabulary, or simply answer their questions. “At the same time we’re seeing that the kids are comfortable with the material,” she said.

Gordon said that the “big reason our program works is students get to use English one on one,” adding that in their schools, English classes may have as many as 45 students, which limits opportunities for students to practice the language.

A student that Tiby recently mentored invited her to visit, which she said she hopes to do the next time she is in Israel. Mentors can visit with a parent’s permission and in the presence of a parent.

Originally Israel Connect mentors would recruit their friends to add to their ranks; but now, for every current student, three more are in the pipeline. So this year systems are finally in place that can accommodate many more mentors; Israel Connect works with Chabads, federations, synagogues, and tikkun olam groups, Gordon said, to recruit mentors throughout North America. The suggested contribution for mentors is \$18 to help cover the program’s operational costs, but she said, many are on a fixed income and are not able to make the donation. People who wish to become mentors can sign up at IsraelConnect.today.

Right now New Jersey has between 30 and 40 mentors, but Gordon has high hopes for the future. “If my little Ottawa can have 100 mentors, New Jersey can have hundreds,” she said.

Lapkin, a strong Israel supporter, sees another plus for American Jews in this program. “Unfortunately so many Jews in my age group feel a tremendous disconnect from Israel. Especially non-temple goers have pretty much distanced themselves from Israel,” she said. Israel Connect “really gives you a personal attachment and at the same time you’re learning ... about Israel and how magnificent a country it is.”

But mostly it is “wonderful fun,” Lapkin said. “My kids call me Savta Tiby” — Grandma Tiby — “and that’s kind of how they treat me and I treat them.”

Indeed, Lapkin noted that mentoring Israeli students “is one of the most meaningful things that I do — and I do a lot of stuff. ”

READ MORE:

• [News](#) • [Princeton Mercer Bucks News](#) • [Israel News](#) • [Israel](#) • [education](#) • [Middlesex/Monmouth News](#)