

Over the past year and a half, the curriculum has been tested in several classrooms in the New York area. We have asked two teachers who tested, and continue to use the curriculum in their classroom, to share their experiences in implementing the units.

Ilana Rauzman – Having taught Judaics for seven years, Ilana is currently teaching 5th grade girls at Yeshivat Noam in Bergen County, New Jersey.

Shoshi Radinsky – Teaches 5th grade co-ed Judaics at SAR Academy in Riverdale, New York. She has taught at SAR in various capacities for XX years.

1. What do you think are the strengths of the units that you have used in your classroom?

Ilana: I am a very firm believer in the kids figuring a lot out on their own. I want them to work together and empathize with the characters and see them as people and not just 2-dimensional characters in a book. The JOFA units are so direct; they have clear goals, starting point, end point, and the students work it out on their own. The students love it, they come to class open up their chumashim ... so excited. We may not cover as much text as we could, but they are learning such quality material and they love it.

2. How do your students respond to these lessons?

Shoshi: The kids love it, they ask when we're going to have a special Humash class (how Shoshi refers to the JOFA lessons)

A lot of students who don't normally participate in class participate during these lessons. I am always a little skeptical that the kids will be able to take that extra step and they always do it in ways I never would have expected.

Ilana: There is a lot more participation from the entire class when we do these units. There are so many different types of questions, so many different intelligences - the coloring, the cartoons, the story lines... So many different pieces of it speak to so many different types of kids. They are so involved and have so much "buy-in".

3. How does student participation change when you do a JOFA lesson?

Shoshi: There are times that I think to myself – this is definitely not going to work in the class – usually things that are more creative, less structured like asking kids to act things out, or writing a diary entry from Miriam's point of view, the use of music But in the end when we do it, all the kids participate, happily. I'm always surprised by how well they relate to it.

They have a high level of ownership around their conclusions. I see it on their tests; on one test, almost all of the kids wrote the same answer to a question on the test, all based on what they learned in the JOFA unit.

4. How do students respond to gender issues raised in these units?

Shoshi: I think that some of these things might come up in my class anyway but the way it is done in the JOFA curriculum is so beautiful, rooted in something real. The girls

especially can identify with these female characters and can think to themselves “that leader could be me!”

Ilana: The gender issue does not stick out, when I think back to the units I think, yeah, they are all about women, but it doesn’t feel that way when we are doing them. The learning is so genuine, and grounded in the text. It doesn’t seem like we’re focusing on women versus men. It’s just learning deeply about a character.

5. What impact do the midrashim have on the lessons?

Shoshi: The use of midrash is not just the skills of learning Rashi but understanding the midrash behind the Rashi and what the midrash is doing there. This leads the students to a deeper understanding of the character.

Ilana: The midrashim taught in the units reflect what the pshat says. After studying the midrashim, the students are able to differentiate between the Torah text and the midrash, they can say “oh, that’s pshat and that’s from the midrash.” That is also very valuable for them.

6. Has using the JOFA curriculum impacted your teaching (outside of teaching the JOFA units) in any way?

Shoshi: I love teaching these units! I have all these ideas about how the class should run, but it’s sometimes hard to develop all the pieces of an overarching big picture lesson. This has definitely not just given me the experience of doing the JOFA lessons but also given me the tools to do it on my own. Using the curriculum has forced me stop and look at the bigger picture, think more about my goals, the characters and midrashim.

Ilana: There are no materials available in the Orthodox world that focus on women. When I look at materials developed by non-Orthodox institutions, it feels like they don’t transfer well to an Orthodox setting. The JOFA units don’t feel risky at all, they are rooted in the text and come from within the Orthodox framework.