

# NEW JERSEY Jewish Standard

## Books to Africa, IB to Schechter

As it packs up books to bring to South Africa, Schechter in New Milford learns it won certification as International Baccalaureate middle school

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The Solomon Schechter Day School of Bergen County in New Milford has big news. Its middle school had been certified as an International Baccalaureate World School, the only Jewish day school between Maine and Georgia to have gained that credential. (Only six secular schools in New Jersey have it.)

As it continues on the IB path it formally began three years ago, as it began to make formal the inquiry-based, child-centered, multidisciplinary, deeply Jewish approach it has employed for years, the school also is putting its values into practice.

This summer, its head, Ruth Gafni, and its librarian, Beryl Bresgi, will go to South Africa, to dedicate the library they have sent to a school there.

What can be more Jewish than giving books? Than realizing that the human need to lose yourself in another time and place, to learn what it's like to be someone else, to learn facts and burrow deep into interpretations and worldviews and stories stories stories?

And what can be more open to the rest of the world, more indicative of the understanding that we all exist in a web, not a vacuum, than to send books outside our own world? To make a connection with someone else's world? And to do it personally, with an open mind and heart

So — the books to South Africa.

Ms. Bresgi grew up on a farm in South Africa, about an hour outside Johannesburg, in a town called Leslie. “The South African Jewish community got there in the early 20th century,” she said.



Visiting writer Caitlin Alifirenka talks about her memoir, “I Will Always Write Back,” the school’s One Community, One Read selection; the memoir, about a penpal friendship that changed lives, inspired students’ social action.



Schechter Middle School students design and build solar lightboxes for students at the Langabuya School in Paarl region of South Africa.

“A lot of our parents and grandparents lived on farms together. We had three generations living on our farm. And it was not a mom-and-pop operation. It was huge. There is a South African measurement called a morgen; my father had 2,000 morgen.” That’s about 14,234 acres.

“There were about 200 black families, with kids, living on the farm, plus migrant workers,” she said. Apartheid did not end until 1991, so there were rigid rules in place that restricted these families’ movement. They were not free, as we understand freedom.

“So my father started a little school with a teacher,” Ms. Bresgi said. “As a kid, I was a huge reader” — remember, she’s a librarian! — “so I would look through those books.” Some of them were in a language she could not read — Xhosa, the native language.

“I was fascinated by how different this school was from my school,” she said. “We went to an Afrikaans school. There was a strong Jewish community, so we had a Hebrew school that was built by my father and his generation.” Teachers would come to the afterschool program twice a week.



This is the school in Mbekweni township in Paarl, South Africa, whose library Schechter is creating.

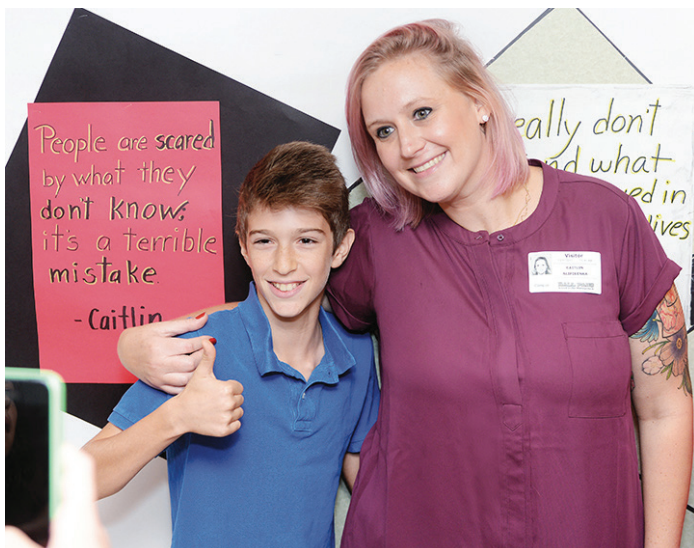
“Elementary school only went up to the seventh or eighth grade, and then parents had to make a decision,” Ms. Bresgi said. “We could either go to an English school that was farther away, or to a Jewish boarding school in Johannesburg called the King David School. That’s where most of the kids in our community went. It was the only Jewish boarding school in sub-Saharan Africa. It had kids from all over South Africa and Zambia.”

The school was huge, it was famous, “it was a British-style boarding school, and I hated it,” Ms. Bresgi said. She was 11 when she started there.

She was the second of four children, and her parents decided that they could not stomach the idea of all of them being away, so after a year they all moved to Johannesburg, and she became a day student at King David. “I liked it much better after that,” she said.

Her parents were deeply involved in Jewish life in the city. “My father represented all the rural communities on the Jewish Board of Education,” the local umbrella group, she said.

This is not only interesting in the abstract but also relevant, because “I grew up knowing about the rural schools, and the school on the farm made a big impression,” she said.



Caitlin Alifrenka stands with a middle school student.

Eventually her parents made aliyah, along with her two younger siblings; she and her brother Morris stayed. He is a doctor in South Africa today; Ms. Bresgi, who had gotten married, came to the United States with her husband, Ivan, so he could go to graduate school, earning a doctorate in psychology at Columbia. “We were on our way to Israel, but we never made it,” she said.

“I was here on a J2 visa, so I couldn’t work,” she said. “That left me with not much else to do other than study. I found out that Columbia had a library school, so I enrolled.” That was 1983.

The family moved to Teaneck, where they joined Congregation Beth Sholom, put their children in Solomon Schechter, and Ms. Bresgi joined the faculty. “I’ve been at Schechter for 29 years, and now I have two grandchildren there,” she said. (Now she and her husband live in Fort Lee.)

And then, years later, just last year, she was at a bat mitzvah for a friend’s daughter, “and I was talking to my friend’s sister, who lives in South Africa and is the head of pediatrics at the Red Cross hospital in Cape Town.” That’s Dr. Heather Zar, who, among other awards and prizes, most recently was named 2018 L’Oreal-UNESCO Women in Science Laureate. Dr. Zar knows Ms. Bresgi’s

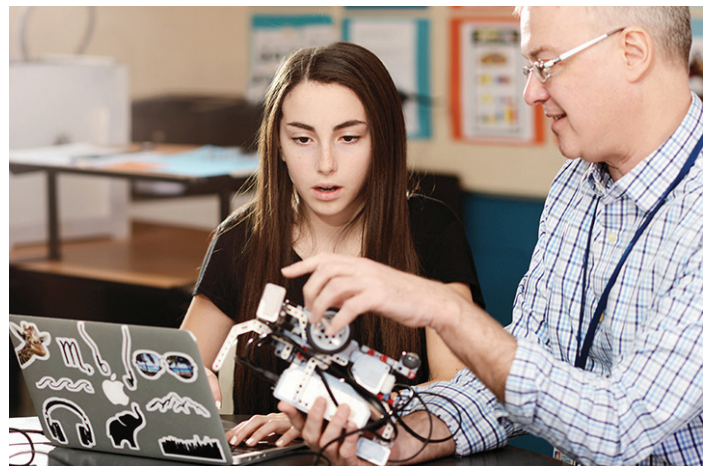
brother, because of course there aren’t so many degrees of separation between South Africa Jews.

A few years ago, Ms. Bresgi and Ms. Gafni, the head of school, went to Rwanda; “our Holocaust curriculum is connected to the universal message,” Ms. Bresgi said. “We teach the particular and keep bringing in the universal. We are always looking for global reach.”

So “when we became an IB school, and talked about the global connection, all of this is constantly whirling in my head,” she continued. “I thought about what the needs must be in South Africa — I’m sure they’re huge — and I asked Heather about them.

“She said that she is doing epidemiological research on under resourced areas, and that one of the schools they’re studying needs a soccer field and a library, and it gelled for me.

“I said, ‘I can’t do a soccer field — but a library I can do.’



Middle school students learn to code the robots they build as part of the expanded STEAM program.

“Heather told me that I wouldn’t know anything about the school, or even the place where the school is. It’s a little place outside Cape Town, she said. I said, ‘Tell me,’ and she said, ‘It’s Paarl.’

“That’s the little town my mother and grandparents came from.” (It’s also the region of South Africa that produces most of the wines the country exports, she added.)

“So I sat with that, and then I talked to Ruth, and I said that this is what I would like to do, and she was incredibly supportive. It began with fund-raising.”

That’s always a taut line to walk, on one side the tug is toward the absolute need to raise money for your own school, and on the other is to do it for an outside cause. “And then we came up with a wonderful model,” Ms. Bresgi said. “Let’s do it for both libraries.”

It’s particularly important because “our children have a very narrow lens on life. They’re Jewish white kids in Bergen County. I really want them to understand the world generally.

“Our library collection is strong on Africa. I really want them to understand the concept that Africa is not a country. It is a continent. So I thought I would develop our collection to show the diverse experiences of diverse groups.” Her collection includes both books about Jewish children living Jewish lives and stories about people “who don’t look like them, speak like them or act like them.”

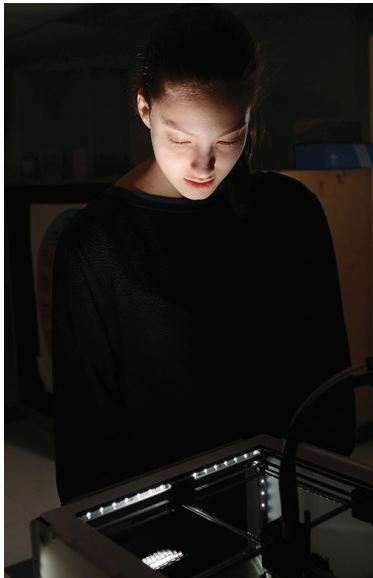
When she began to fund raise for books to send to Africa, “the response from the community was incredible,” she said. “We didn’t expect such a generous response. And such fantastic notes! It was



so satisfying. Even the small donations came with such wonderful words! It was so gratifying.

“So I started buying books.”

She is working with people in Dr. Zar’s department and with a book-donation NGO called Biblionef; recently, the school shipped out about 700 books, for 5- through 14-year-olds. They’re all in English; another collection, in Xhosa, comes from South Africa.



*A student works with a 3-D printer, which is used not as a flashy toy but a tool to help repair the world.*

“At first, I thought I would just buy the books and send them,” Ms. Bresgi said. “But I realized that I am not just sending books. I am sending a library. So I realized that I should send a catalogue.”

The catalogue will be a physical list, printed out in ink on paper, the old-fashioned way, and color-coded. There would be no point to a digital one. The school library does not have a computer; moreover, its leaders do not want one. “They said it would just get stolen,” she said.

“I have our kids learning about South Africa, and the continent of Africa in general,” she said. “I had them write some notes for the books; I will take a lot of the notes with me.” She and Ms.

Gafni plan to go to the school in July.

“Ruth and I are going because of our whole global connection and Holocaust connection,” she said. “We are going to do a workshop at the new Johannesburg Holocaust and Genocide Center. We met the director, Tali Nates, in Rwanda; we will do a talk on what we do on Holocaust and genocide education there, and we will learn from them. And then we are going to Cape Town to meet with representatives of the Department of Education of the Western Cape.

“And then we will go set up the library.”

Whitney Barnett is a link in the chain between the school and the library. She is from Tennessee, but now she lives in South Africa. (That results in an interesting hybrid accent.) She works at the Research Centre for Adolescent and Child Health at the University of Cape Town, where she is the project manager of a study “looking broadly at how risk factors are determinative of child health,” she said. “It’s a multidisciplinary study led by a pediatric pulmonologist and has since grown to encompass more fields.”

How is this relevant?

“We have been doing this study in two communities in Paarl,” she said. “As researchers we have an ethical obligation to community engagement. That comes in many forms. Some of it is just disseminating research findings from the study.”

Another part of it is trying to meet some of the needs the researchers uncover.

“We have identified a school that is close to one of our research sites,” Ms. Barnett said. “Some of the kids in the study have enrolled in this school. It’s an underprivileged community — a historically disadvantaged black African community — with about 1,400 kids,

more or less a primary school, first through 8th or 9th grades.

“We reached out to the school to find out if there is a way to partner with it, so find out what it needs. They came back with a long list.” That list included a library. From the ground up. Literally. There is no building for it, no infrastructure, and no books.

Enter the Solomon Schechter Day School of Bergen County. (And, of course, enter the worldwide network of Jews.) The school will provide the books; the researchers have connected to funders who will house those books.

“Part of the IB program is to have a global lens on every unit of study,” Ms. Gafni said. “We are pushing beyond our classroom walls, so that our students will have an understanding of what is going on in the world, and they will be empowered to act about it.

“The IB is transforming the way that we teach our core curriculum.”

As they combine ideas and disciplines, Schechter students learn to use ideas to figure out how to make things — and then actually to make those things. Case in point — flashlights.

“Our students are working on building mini lights,” Ms. Gafni said; “they’re about the size of cigarette boxes,” she added, dating herself. (But what else is just about that size?)

They’re for people, like the ones in South Africa, who do not have reliable access to electricity, and so cannot charge devices even if they were to get them. “The top of the flashlight is a small solar panel, and there is a circuit within it that you can switch on or off.



*Middle-schoolers build the solar-powered lights that will be sent to South Africa.*

“During the day, you can put it in the sun, and it will charge itself. At night, you use it.

“The kids created it. They are building it. The circuits were preordered, but they designed it.”

The lights also are very inexpensive to make.

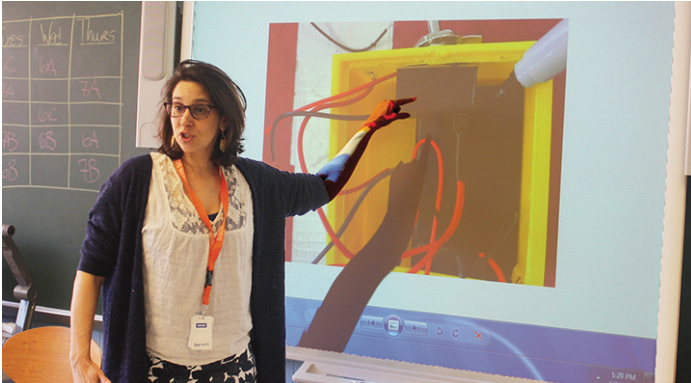
Why do middle-school students need a design class? Why is one even an appropriate use of their time? “Because even though design seems like something that is more esoteric or artistic, in this class you learn about precision. You have to follow a certain set order of things, and do it exactly right, in order to have the thing you are making work.”

The Schechter delegation will bring the lights to South Africa, “fusing the design work and the understanding that there are places in the world where people are not as privileged as we are,” Ms. Gafni said.

The project of sending books and flashlights to South Africa “is an example of how we broaden the classroom. It is tikkun olam, repairing the world, and it is taking what we teach and having it come to life.

“It is not that we are going to learn precision in applying measurements in the abstract. It is that there is a real need. There are real people in this village who cannot read in the evenings because they do not have electricity for power, but with this little solar panel they will have access to light.”

The precision, the attention to detail, and the interdisciplinary push to pay attention to what you see and learn and know is all part of the IB curriculum, which is specifically for the middle school but makes itself felt through the school.



*Schechter's design instructor, Harley Ungar, talks about designing and building solar light boxes.*

“There is a lot of innovation,” Ms. Gafni said. “When you see the little ones, the 5-year-olds, you see it.”

Now that the school has been certified as an IB institution — a difficult process, not unlike getting certifications from such institutions as the Middle States Association and the New Jersey Association of Independent Schools, certifications Schechter already has secured — it plans to continue to develop its students’ intellects, emotions, their connections to the Jewish world and to the outside world, and their ability to navigate those worlds with the skill, delicacy, insight, and attention to nuance and detail that education at its best is meant to provide. It’s a constantly moving target, and one at which the best schools, across the spectrum, aim.



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