



Bnos

SEVEN-UP, BROKEN TELEPHONE.
PARASHAH QUESTIONS, SINGING CONTESTS
POTATO CHIPS, LICORICE

The Social and the Spiritual

The role of Bnos then and now

Seven-Up and Broken Telephone.

Parashah questions and singing contests.

Potato chips and licorice.

The all-time classic song “Shabbos, Shabbos, Yom Menuchah...”

If you ever attended Bnos, you will probably fondly remember participating in these Shabbos-afternoon activities.

For close to a century, Shabbos-afternoon Bnos groups have been the gathering place for young girls (and their Bnos leaders) to play, talk, sing, and connect with each other. Some girls enjoy the games and activities, some look forward to the Shabbos party nosh, and some Bnos participants are forced out of the house by a mother in desperate need of a Shabbos nap.

But does Shabbos Bnos serve a larger purpose than a game and a lollipop?

Bnos in the 21st Century

According to Mrs. Chana Baila Hass, national director of Bnos Agudath Israel, today, the major mission of Bnos is to provide girls with an opportunity to thrive outside of the academic environment. The activities on Shabbos afternoon, and the special events throughout the year, give girls a chance to meet and connect with other girls in the community. Many girls find fulfillment and inspiration in their Bnos groups.

The number and size of Bnos groups in each locale vary according to the needs of the Jewish community. In cities with a concentrated population, there may be one large Bnos group for the entire community. In neighborhoods where the Jewish population is more spread out, a few branches of Bnos will open in order to accommodate every area. Bnos is constantly growing, and new branches are opened every year.

There are communities that operate Bnos groups independently of Agudath Israel. Some chassidishe communities run Bnos groups within their school systems. Bobover Bnos is run by Mrs. Malky Kiwak and her twin sister, Mrs. Faigy Halpern, under the auspices of

Rebbetzin Devorah Lea Goldberger, dean of Bnos Zion girls school.

Mrs. Kiwak relates that the goal of her Bnos groups is to keep girls in a good *sevivah*, environment, on Shabbos afternoon. She also highlights the importance of having high school girls as role models for younger girls.

“The Bnos girls can look up to their leaders in a different way than a teacher or a parent,” Mrs. Kiwak says. She recalls her own childhood Bnos leader. “We loved our Bnos leader; we would have gone through fire for her.”

Different Communities, Different Effects

It seems that the nature of the community has a strong effect on the

role of Bnos. Bnos fills a special need in out-of-town communities versus the densely populated *frum* neighborhoods. In areas where *frum* families are few and far between, it can be difficult for girls to find a social outlet on Shabbos afternoons. Bnos serves an integral purpose of gathering all the girls to a central location for activities and socializing.

In an area where *frum* neighbors are the norm, there may be less interest in Shabbos-afternoon Bnos. After all, the girls can just step onto their front porch to find their friends.

Baila*, who lives in Lakewood, argues that Bnos has a value, even within densely populated areas. “My daughter has difficulty socializing without official play dates. Bnos is a good way for her to make new friends.”

Age and maturity also affect the demographics of Bnos. While younger groups from first through fourth grade are often full to capacity, the attendance at many Bnos groups tapers off by sixth and seventh grade. It’s possible that the novelty has worn off for the preteen age group. Or they may be more interested in casual *schmoozing* with friends than a structured program.

The attitudes of different age groups and communities are reflected not just in Bnos attendance, but also within the leadership. While some Bnos groups are run by an enthusiastic group of girls, in other communities there is a dearth of Bnos leaders. There is much speculation as to why today’s high school girls are

Facts and Figures

There are 39 Bnos Agudath Israel locations across the U.S. and Canada. Brooklyn, NY, has the largest Bnos population overall. Lakewood, NJ, has the highest number of Bnos branches. Bnos Agudath Israel operates across the U.S. and Canada — in Milwaukee, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, Toronto, Detroit, and Chicago, and more. Bnos One-on-One currently has 250 participants.



less eager to participate in Bnos.

Some teenage girls would rather spend their Shabbos afternoons napping, reading a book, or *schmoozing* with their friends. They are hesitant to commit to spending week after week playing games and telling stories with a group of 10, 20, or 30 eight-year-olds.

Mrs. Cohen,* a mother and grandmother of Bnos leaders, says that she has noticed how schools have expanded their extracurricular activities over the last decade. “The high school girls are consumed with their school and after-school activities. They have clubs and plays and *Shabbatons*. By the time it comes to Shabbos, they are too exhausted to get involved in leading a Bnos group.”

While the schools are doing a wonderful job in their multi-faceted programs, Mrs. Cohen laments the changing attitudes of today’s teens.

“The high school girls are so busy with school activities that they don’t have time to give to the younger kids,” she posits. Mrs. Cohen thinks that the waning interest in Bnos in her town has

Leading a Bnos group is tremendously rewarding, both for the leader and for the girls, regardless of age, size or location.

a negative effect on the community. “Bnos brought all of the girls, from all different schools, together. We were part of Agudath Israel. Now, when I ask a girl if she knows someone, I will often hear, ‘No, she doesn’t go to my school.’” Mrs.

Secrets to Success

You don’t have to be a multi-talented mastermind in order to run a successful Bnos group. Many leaders will utilize their particular strengths. Some prefer singing, some like to dance; some will plan activities, games, or competitions. Mrs. Kiwak of Bobov Bnos says that the secret of a successful Bnos leader is caring for the children. “You don’t have to know how to sing, dance, or act. You have to care for the children, and they will feel it.”

Mrs. Kiwak feels that storytelling is a crucial Bnos activity in order for the girls to come home with something inspirational. She offers four tips for successful storytelling:

- Know the facts. Make sure you have all the details of the story before you begin.
- Be dramatic. Make the story exciting, but not too dramatic that it becomes a farce.
- Make eye contact. Look at the children to draw them into your story.
- Get the kids involved. Pause at points in the story to ask questions or for their opinion, such as saying, “What would you do in this situation?”

Cohen mourns the loss of the cohesive bond that is usually formed in Bnos.

Suri* in contrast, saying that there is a strong involvement in her hometown. “We had this sense of civic obligation. It wasn’t a question; of course we were Bnos leaders!” Suri’s experience may be the result of her out-of-town mentality, where there is generally a larger feeling of personal *achrayus*, as each member of the community can make a tangible contribution.

In the interest of full disclosure: I have been a Bnos leader in the out-of-town community of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and in Lakewood. In my experience,

leading a Bnos group is tremendously rewarding, both for the leader and for the girls, regardless of age, size or location.

In Pittsburgh, Shabbos-afternoon groups, called *Oneg*, were organized by my mother, Rebbetzin Debbie Miller. *Oneg* is where I first practiced my storytelling skills, spinning tales for my group of seventh- and eighth-graders. It’s where I began acting, taking the leading role in “Getzel and Pretzel” comedy sketches that we performed at the monthly assemblies. It’s where I tapped in to my artistic side when we painted a

mural on the wall of the Bnos room.

I also learned about communal responsibility as an *Oneg* leader. I learned that it is expected that I will give up my time to lead a group every Shabbos, take them roller skating on Chol Hamoed, or plan a Chanukah party.

Of course, this lesson may have been forced upon me by virtue of the fact that my mother was the organizer, and so I had no choice. But it was a valuable lesson all the same, and I hope that the practical applications are bearing fruit today.

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Venues and Locations

The location of Bnos also affects the leadership. Shabbos groups in a school are usually run by high school girls, while Bnos that rotates among private homes can sometimes be run by the hostess of the week. There is some debate regarding the best venue for Bnos.

Elky* attended Bnos first in her Lakewood elementary school, and then in her friends’ houses. She feels that the afternoons in individual homes were much better. “I think that our mothers put in a lot more effort,” Elky says. “They want the Bnos to work out well for their daughters and for themselves. And they don’t get burned out, because they’re only doing Bnos once every few weeks.” Home Bnos has the added advantage of being very exciting for the host girl, as everyone gets to come to her house.

Baila* was in high school when she ran a Bnos group that rotated among parents’ homes. She found it challenging because each week’s Bnos turned into a popularity contest. “If Bnos was at the ‘cool girl’s’ house, everyone would come. But when Bnos was hosted by one of the less popular girls, just two people showed up, and the host felt terrible.”

Baila took to calling her girls before Shabbos and begging them to come, even if they weren’t good friends with the host. “I think the social pressure caused a lot of girls’ feelings to be hurt,” Baila says regretfully.

Some Bnos members prefer a larger program, where all the girls gather in one location. Raizy says that she preferred her

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Bnos Agudath Yisrael Resources

Each branch of Bnos receives guidance from the Bnos Agudath Israel headquarters. The Agudah produces a weekly *parashah* guide, which provides stories and activity ideas based on the *parashah*, and is available as a book or CD. There is the colorful *Kol Bnos* newsletter, published triennially, which contains pictures from Bnos events across the country, activity and game ideas, interviews with Bnos leaders, and a fun page.

And the annual National Bnos Leader Convention provides the Bnos leaders with practical resources, such as activity ideas, tools for effective discipline, and event-planning techniques, as well as a chance to interact with their peers and share ideas. The National Bnos Leader Convention is a major attraction for many high school girls.

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A Historical Perspective

Bnos was originally founded by Sara Schenirer, א"ח, in Cracow, Poland. As part of her campaign to instill the value and beauty of *Yiddishkeit* in the girls of her generation, Sara Schenirer established a program which provided girls with an enriching social and spiritual supplement to their daily lives. Under the auspices of Agudas Yisroel, the younger girls groups were called Batya, and the high-school-age girls attended Bnos.

In 1920's Poland, Bnos and Batya groups served a vital purpose beyond providing a platform for socializing. While the Bais Yaakov movement was taking root, most young girls attended public school. Families could not afford the luxury of private tuition, and many teenage girls left school to take jobs to help support their families.

Bnos was a meeting place for girls to maintain their connection to *Yiddishkeit*. There was a strong emphasis on learning and acts of *chesed*. During the upheaval of the *Haskalah* movement, Bnos attached girls to the Agudas Yisroel, helping to re-establish Torah as the cornerstone of their lives. The Agudas Yisroel program of Batya still exists in Eretz Yisrael today, while Bnos was transplanted to American shores.

Bnos was actually a precursor to the Bais Yaakov movement in America. Shabbos afternoon groups in America were founded by mothers and daughters who wanted to strengthen *Yiddishkeit* before there was any option for Bais Yaakov schools. Mrs. Fruma Leah Mandel, ז"ל, instituted the Shabbos groups in her home when her daughter spoke about the secular extracurricular activities in her public school.

Mrs. Surtie Barkin, sister of the renowned Harav Yisroel Belsky, *shlita*, of the OU and Torah Vodaath, explains that her mother, Mrs. Chana (Wilhelm) Belsky, was one of the founding members of Bnos in America. "I have a photo of my mother on a Bnos trip," Mrs. Barkin says. "She is on a Chol Hamoed trip, on a boat with her Bnos group." In her mother's time, when Bais Yaakov did not yet exist, Bnos was focused on learning, doing *chesed*, and inspirational Shabbos gatherings.

Mrs. Barkin attended Bais Yaakov in the early days in Williamsburg, and Bnos was an integral part of her life. She recalls the stories, singing, and dancing they did at their Bnos groups. "Whenever we had a group of girls together, if there were no men around, within minutes we would be singing or dancing." One aspect of Bnos which Mrs. Barkin thinks is lost on today's generation is the singing and dancing. "When I tell Bnos leaders to sing and dance with their groups, they think I'm off the wall. Why should we dance? Is this a wedding?"

Mrs. Barkin regularly speaks with Bnos leaders in her city of residence, Cleveland, about the significance of the work they are doing. "I tell the girls about the importance of Bnos, how they are acting as role models. Many times, a girl cannot relate to a teacher or mother because she sees her as an authority figure. But a Bnos leader has the opportunity to influence younger girls by acting as an example of a *bas Yisrael*."

childhood Bnos, located in a shul in Philadelphia. "I liked that we were all in one building," she remembers. "We used to get together at the end for snacks, and our leaders had a theme song, which we sang all together. We felt like we were part of a cohesive group."

Mrs. Kiwak also notes the advantages of a school-run program — she and her sister can supervise if any discipline issues arise. "Sometimes girls will act out because they all want attention from the leader. Usually, it's very minor, but if we need to get involved, the leaders will say, 'The twins are coming!' and everyone is on their best behavior."

With individualized groups in homes, lack of adult supervision can sometimes be a problem if the girls begin to act out. The Bnos leaders are usually able to steer a group back on track with a promise of a nosh or a game. But if the situation gets out of hand, sometimes a parent will have to step in, which can be awkward for everyone involved.

A New Program for New Times

As times change and communities evolve, the needs of our young girls change as well. Over the past few years, Agudath Israel began receiving requests for programming for sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade girls. This preteen age group had grown out of the regularly structured Shabbos Bnos, but there was

She ran a Bnos group that rotated among parents' homes. She found it challenging because each week's Bnos turned into a popularity contest.

still a need for social and spiritual enrichment outside of a classroom setting.

The Bnos One-on-One program was established by Agudath Israel three years ago. It is essentially a mentor program that pairs eleventh- and twelfth-grade girls with a "little sister" in sixth, seventh, or eighth grade. The "big sisters" and "little sisters" meet individually for fun events, *schmoozing*, and connecting.

Bnos One-on-One currently operates in Brooklyn, Lakewood, Monsey, Los Angeles, and Baltimore, and has plans to expand over the coming year. They have received a large number of requests from "little sisters" and are seeking high school girls who are available to join the program as "big sisters."

Sari* was a big sister in the Brooklyn Bnos One-on-One program in eleventh grade. "I signed up because I wanted to do something constructive with my time, and I thought this would be a good experience," Sari says.

Although she enjoyed spending time with her "little sister," she found it difficult to keep up the momentum in their relationship. The occasional walk in the park or Sunday-afternoon *schmoozing* eventually petered out. Sari thinks if there would have been more structured programming, such as planned events for big and little sisters, it would have been more successful.

Sari's lackluster experience seems to be the exception; most mentors feel that they do receive support from their branch leaders. They keep focused with a log of the time and activities, which is submitted to their branch leader, and they know that their branch leader is available if any issues should arise.

Gittel* describes the impact of one Bnos One-on-One relationship. She once spent Shabbos with a young teenage girl, Tami*, and during a late Friday night *schmooze*, Tami opened up to tell Gittel that she was struggling with a personal challenge, and that no one in her family or group of friends knew about it. Gittel was stymied by Tami's revelation and

was not sure how she could help her, especially after Tami made her promise not to tell a soul.

"Does anyone else know about this?" Gittel asked Tami.

"I told my Bnos big sister," Tami answered.

As a big sister herself, Gittel understood the unique nature of their relationship.

"I was so relieved to hear that Tami had told someone," Gittel explains. "I know that her big sister is going to listen and be there for her, and at the same time, find out what she can do to help Tami through this challenge."

While most big sisters will not have to address these challenging issues, there is support available for those who do. Branch leaders are ready to help if any problems arise.

The little sisters enjoy the quality time and attention from their big sisters. Gittel bakes with her little sister on Sunday afternoons; Shiffy* meets her little sister for ice cream after school. "Seventh grade is an awkward phase. The girls are going through a transition," Shiffy says. "I remember when I was in seventh grade. I would have been thrilled to receive attention from a high school girl."

Is the future of Bnos headed towards individualized programs, as more girls seek personal relationships and mentors, over a group setting? Or will there always be a place for a Shabbos afternoon game of Seven-Up, with the camaraderie and inspiration of a group of Bnos girls and their leader?

As the structure of Bnos evolves over time, the goal of strengthening connections to *Yiddishkeit* and to other *frum* girls is constant. With the development of the Bnos One-on-One program, Agudath Israel is poised to meet the needs of the next generation. It remains to be seen if the high school girls will step up to the challenge and become mentors and role models for the future Bnos girls. **B**

*Names have been changed.

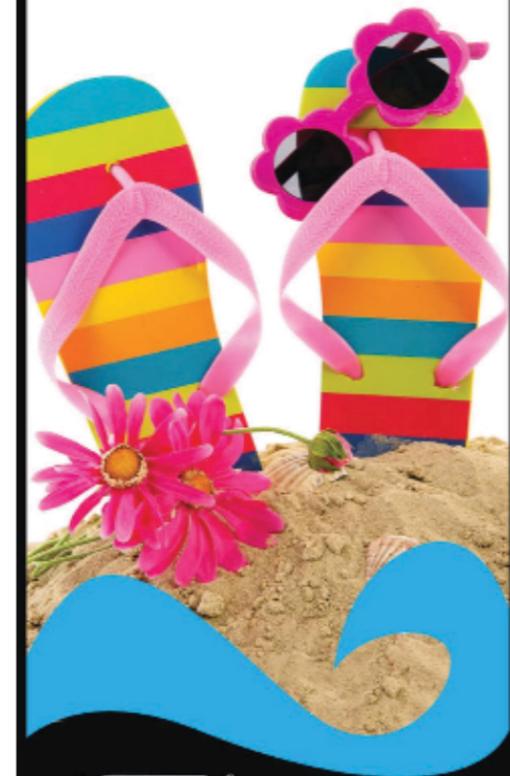
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