

CLEVELAND Jewish News.com

Where a good question is worth 36 baseball cards

By: ELLEN SCHUR BROWN Editor, Family Section

The freewheeling discussion around Rabbi Shmuel Jablon's Beachwood living room rambles from who qualifies as a kohen (member of the priestly class) to tithing a portion of the fruit harvest to exemptions from army service.

The learners are not exactly Torah scholars, at least not yet. They are fourth-, fifth- and sixth-graders, some in Cleveland Indians shirts and baseball caps.

Welcome to the Summer Mishna and Baseball Club where Jablon, lower-school principal of Fuchs Mizrahi School, merges his two passions: Torah and baseball.

The 15 boys and girls, all Mizrahi students, sit with rapt attention, some on the white leather sofa, others on chairs brought in from the kitchen. Jablon directs them to a line in their Mishna text. He chants the line in Hebrew and they repeat it ... strongly at first and falling off at the end.

"Let's try that line again," he says, and the repeat is stronger. Then the youngsters discuss in English what they've read one line at a time. Several participants raise their hands with alacrity.

No one fidgets or gets up n except to snare another Dum Dum sucker from a huge, overflowing bowl in the dining room.

After today's discussion comes the reward for spending summer weekends learning: a trip to the Indians game at Jacobs Field against the Kansas City Royals.

The Mishna is the core text of the Oral Torah, recording discussions on every aspect of Jewish law.

Mizrahi students study the actual books of the Mishna in their original Hebrew. They also study additional rabbinic commentaries and issues in Jewish law to better understand the core text.

Leora Jaffe, 11, wants to return to a previous topic n preparation for warfare n specifically, wars you don't have to fight versus wars to defend your land from attackers. If someone is trying to take over or destroy Israel, everyone must fight, they agree. Everyone in the room has friends or family in Israel, so it's a relevant topic for these youngsters.



Noah Bar-Shain, right, and friends from the Mishna and Baseball Club reach for a candy pick-me-up.

Leora asks, "If the age (of the draft) in the Torah is 20, why can you be drafted in Israel at age 18? Aren't we supposed to do everything according to Jewish law?"

Jablon puts on his "rebbe" persona and chuckles softly. "That's a very good question," he admits. The room explodes with giggles, because in this club, a good question is worth 36 baseball cards: 36 is double chai (the number 18 and the symbol for life), explain some of the boys.

"Thank G-d for ebay," Jablon says. "We go through a lot of cards." His apt student/collectors report that he buys them 5000 at a time.

The discussion continues with each new topic: Which prayers may be said in English. How doctors may work on Shabbat if they are needed to save a life. How the nearest town must atone for a victim who is murdered along the road.

A lifelong baseball fan, Jablon's living room is decorated with religious art and baseball memorabilia. From ages 12 to 16, he published a sports magazine out of his St. Louis home, which gave him the opportunity to meet some of the sport's greatest players.

"I have always taught baseball history as part of history classes," he says, and he sometimes invites former ball players like Bob Feller, Andre Thornton and Jim "Mudcat" Grant to speak to the club.

During the school year, Mizrachi offers a full lineup of optional Mishna clubs for the lower school including the Mishna and Baseball Club. Some text study groups meet each week or each Shabbat for about an hour or less. The goal is to cover two volumes each year.

For some youngsters, talking about baseball is the main draw; Leora, for example, seems quite pleased she'll be getting some new cards.

But others are motivated learners for whom sports paraphernalia loom less importantly. Moshe Klein and Eitan Lindenberg, for example, only started collecting baseball cards because of Jablon and the club.

Bentzion Goldman, 9, likes being able to answer his younger brother's questions after shul. "I like to go into the detail because once I was that little boy asking all the questions," he says, admitting he's not a big Indians fan. Leah Jablon, at not-quite-9 years old, says it makes her feel "very grown up and proud" to learn Mishna.

Akiva Lautman, 11, calls the club "a good use of time," and Noah Bar-Shain, 10, says he comes to the club because he likes learning with the rabbi. The personal contact with their principal scores big with some kids. Sometimes if they have to miss a session due to other summer activities, they'll call him to schedule a makeup.

Jablon is happy to be a role model of Jewish learning. "I like it when they ask a question I can't answer. I tell them I have to go to my rabbi," he says.