



## The Wexner Foundation Electronic Beit Midrash Parashat Bechukotai

### Mifgash with the Suquamish

By David Bryfman

David Bryfman, an alumnus of the Wexner Graduate Fellowship Program, is a PhD candidate in Education and Jewish Studies at NYU, writing his dissertation about the identity development of Jewish teenagers in formal and informal Jewish educational settings. He can be contacted at [bryfman@nyu.edu](mailto:bryfman@nyu.edu)

This week I am again reminded of the Jewish maxim:

“Who is wise?” The one who learns from every person” (Pirkei Avot 4:1)

Based on the model of the *mifgash* (the program designed to enable Jews in the Diaspora and Israeli Jews to interact with one another) I was fortunate enough a few years ago to facilitate an encounter between Jewish teens and teenagers from the Suquamish tribe outside of Seattle. The quotes contained within are directly from the Jewish teenagers who participated in this experience.

The day began with an assortment of ice-breakers filled with the usual trepidation and anxiety that occurs when strangers meet. Mutual admiration began to develop when the Suquamish teens became tour guides in their local museum, talking about aspects of their history, culture and ritual to the Jewish teens. The day before, the Jewish teens had the opportunity to create their own Jewish museum: a collection of symbols and artifacts, made of arts and crafts supplies, representing the breadth and diversity of contemporary Jewish life.

*“Seeing kids so dedicated and knowledgeable about their culture was amazing. After taking us through their museum and answering all of our questions confidently, I felt challenged about Judaism – our history, our religion, our culture, and the realization that no matter how different our cultures appeared we had a great amount of similarities.”*

**As is their hospitable way of life, the Suquamish hosted us with a traditional festive lunch. We were** honored by the presence of several tribal elders and the Chief of the tribe who blessed us all before we ate. The meal concluded with Birkat Hamazon ably led and explained by the Jewish teens.

After lunch, the singing and dancing began in Hebrew and in the Suquamish dialect.

*“The respect everyone had for everyone else is something that I rarely see, and it allowed us to connect and really understand each other. Everyone was dancing and laughing when we couldn’t do it as well as the Native Americans. It is a moment I will remember forever.”*



We then went to look at the canoe, which many of the Suquamish teens had been instrumental in making, and which represented so much of the culture of the tribe.

*“My favorite part was learning about the canoe. I found it extremely interesting to know how much of an important part it played in their culture and the various rules and customs surrounding it.”*

Discussions throughout the day had ranged from issues of cultural identity, affinity to the land, leaders in the respective communities, assimilation, inter-marriage and genocide.

*“I even shed a tear when one of the Suquamish women wept openly as she spoke of the pain she felt for Jewish suffering along with the tragedies that had happened to her people”*

The culmination of the day was a “circle” where everyone spoke of something about the day which they appreciated. As each Jewish teen spoke they were presented with a necklace of an oar, a symbol which now meant so much to everyone present.

Whenever an elder entered a room, offered words of wisdom or blessed the group, the Suquamish youngsters would raise both their hands in front of their eyes in a sign of utmost respect. As we departed the Suquamish teens began to sing the song of journey that was usually sung as the men departed on their canoe voyage and the Jewish teens spontaneously raised their hands in honor of the Suquamish tribe.

*“This experience really made me think about things differently. I was blown away by the amount of respect that was shown for the littlest things. Lastly, this encounter taught me not to stereotype. This encounter dispelled many ideas that I had about the people.”*

This day taught me a lot about myself and it also reminded me of many important elements that became integral to my research about Jewish teenagers and Jewish education in general.

- 1) Authenticity and relevance are not mutually exclusive – only by raising the bar of what we expect from our youth can we continue to be inspired by them.
- 2) By listening to teenagers, and I mean really listening, one not only validates and respects them but gives them a voice which is craving to be heard.
- 3) Teenagers are not the “next generation” – they exist in the here and now – they are the Jews of today and not only the Jews of tomorrow.
- 4) In order to learn about one’s self, sometimes one needs to take risks by exploring the “other.”
- 5) Every learner should be a teacher and every teacher should be a learner—even if there is a large age difference.



*“This day was probably one of the most incredible days of my entire life. At first, I didn’t really know what to expect. I had no idea what they were going to think of a group of Jewish teenagers. We shared so much history and culture it was amazing. The connection between the Suquamish tribe and us Jews was fantastic. I truly believe that there is a great possibility of peace throughout the world.”*