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SAR High School Moves Into its New Location

By Robert Lebowitz
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The doors to the building of Riverdale's new Jewish high school opened last Monday, February 23, to the excitement of students, parents, and teachers.

Salanter Akiba Riverdale Academy High School first came into existence

last September, but until last week was housed in the elementary and middle school building on 655 West 254th Street. The new building is located on 259th Street off Riverdale Avenue.

Rabbi Naftali Harcsztark was assistant principal of the SAR lower school for nine years and now has taken over the mantle of leadership at the high school. As he defines it, the essence of the high school's mission is to build and foster a sense of community and positive relationships between parents, teachers, and students.

"In the past, SAR Academy has been defined primarily as a home," said Rabbi Harcsztark, "and this school is a direct outgrowth of that. The idea is to create a serious place of learning, but with respect for the children. The challenge on the high school environment that feels like home and to create a community of learners."

The new building, across the street from the Skyview shopping mall is spacious. Although there are many wings to still complete--such as the installation of the school library--the wide, airy atmosphere is intentional, according to Rabbi Harcsztark.

"The building speaks of being open, communally, internally, and to the world outside," he said. "These are the vital elements of the school."

This openness is also present in the school's philosophy of education, which is to foster community rather than cut-throat competition for grades.

"The learning here is not only to make sure the kids are college-bound, although of course that is a main concern of ours, too. Most of the school is not tracked. While we are responsive to the needs of individual students, we aim to be heterogeneous and to impart the sense that everyone is in this together."

There are numerous activities within the school to promote this atmosphere. There is a "beit midrash"--or Torah study program--housed on the upper floor which has scholars studying full-time. In addition to their learning, these knowledgeable scholars--four of whom are graduates of the SAR middle school themselves--study sacred Jewish texts with the students.

There is also a very involved student council composed of nine students and a permanent faculty member who regularly draw up an agenda and vote on issues of importance to them. Additionally, each faculty member is assigned to a group of students with whom they can discuss anything on their minds, from schoolwork to personal issues. As Rabbi Harcsztark explains, this structure is intended to create a "much more permeable barrier between home and school, and creates a much more cohesive environment."

With all these supportive mechanisms in place, one should not get fooled into thinking SAR students have it that easy. The day is packed with a rigorous schedule of both Jewish and secular subjects, and runs from 8 AM until 5:10 PM, with any extra-curricular events taking place afterwards. Such extra-curricular activities run the gamut from band and chorus practice to mock

trial and dramatics.

There are currently 67 ninth graders enrolled in the school, with only about 25% coming from Riverdale. Other communities represented include Teaneck, New Jersey, Westchester, Manhattan, and even Jacksonville, Florida. Many of them were attracted to the school for the supportive and nurturing environment described by Rabbi Harcsztark.

Sarah Lavin, a ninth grader, said that she chose to attend SAR High School over Ramaz High School on the Upper East Side.

"My older sister goes to Ramaz and I was going to go there, but it didn't seem like a place where I could grow," she related. "It seems like their main concern was about marks. Here, they want you to be the best you can be but there is always someone to help you out."

Rabbi Harcsztark said that although the school does not have a name any more exotic than the "SAR High School," it is dedicated to the memory of J.J. Greenberg, a noted educator and the son of Riverdale Jewish leaders Irving "Yitz" and Blu Greenberg. J.J. grew up in Riverdale and was killed in 2002 by a car while riding a bicycle on a highway in Israel. More information about J.J.'s life and accomplishments can be found on the Web site, <http://www.jjgreenberg.org>.

It is the warm, nurturing, and inspiring spirit that J.J. embodied which Rabbi Harcsztark hopes will invigorate the school and will guide it as it continues to grow in its new location over the coming years.

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