Lesson Plan – The Family:

A laboratory for learning what it means to be human

The following lesson plan is a suggestion of how some of the Leadership ideas and resources contained in this unit could be incorporated into a 60-minute class period for a high-school age class. This lesson plan focuses solely on one particular idea on the theme of Family within the thought of Rabbi Sacks. There are many other themes found in this unit of resources which would take more classroom-time to explore with your students.

Goal: To consider the importance of the family to Judaism, focusing on the idea found in the thought of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt"l that family is where we learn how to be human.

1-5 minutes: Opening Activity

Project this Opening Activity Text on to the board and ask your students the Core Questions.

A retelling of the story, “Somebody’s Son” by Richard Pindell

As David sat on the side of the road in the Dakota plains, waiting for his next ride, he wrote:

Dear Mom,

If Dad will permit it I would like to come home. I know there’s little chance he will. I’m not going to kid myself. I remember he said once, if I ever ran off, I might as well keep going.

All I can say is that I felt like leaving home was something I had to do. I wanted to find out more about life and about me, and the best way for us (life and me) to live with each other.

You won’t be able to reach me by mail, because I don’t know where I will be next. But in a few days I hope to be passing our place. If there’s any chance Dad will have me back, please ask him to tie a white cloth to the apple tree in the south pasture. I’ll be going by on the train. If there’s no cloth on the tree, I’ll just quietly and without any hard feelings toward Dad, keep going.

Love, David

The next day, as the truck that had picked David up soon after finishing his letter pulled into the small town in Iowa, David mailed the letter with a knot in his stomach.

The coming days and weeks brought new acquaintances and adventures as David hitchhiked with cars, vans, trucks, and freight trains, all the time edging closer to his home in Maryland. Finally, as he ascended the passenger train that would be the last leg of his journey homeward, the knot returned.
and firmly lodged itself in his core. He could hardly bring himself to imagine the apple tree in the pasture of his childhood home, for fear it would be bereft of the white cloth, even in his imagination.

As he sat down next to the window that would deliver his fate, an elderly gentleman sat in the seat beside him. As day turned to night, and once again back to day, the travel companion shared their stories. As David regaled stories of the West Coast, Canada and even Mexico, he realised that in just a short while the train tracks would take a gentle bend to the right, and there would be the farm on which he grew up, with its south facing pasture, and the old apple tree on which as a child he would climb. He couldn’t look. He was too afraid the cloth would not be there – too afraid he would find, staring back at him, just another tree, just another field, and turned quickly away.

Desperately, he nudged his travel companion beside him. “Mister, will you do me a favour? Around this bend on the right, you’ll see an apple tree. I wonder if you’ll tell me if you see a white cloth tied to one of its branches?”

“Son,” the man said in a voice slow with wonder, “I see a white cloth tied on almost every twig.”

Core Questions:

- Why did David leave home?
- Why was he worried he may not be able to return home to his parents?
- What did he learn that day on the train?
- Does this story resonate with you?
- What can we learn from this story about families and our family ties?
- Are family relationships unbreakable?
- How important are these relationships throughout a person's life? Can we survive without them?
- How have your family relationships led to self-growth?
**6-30 minutes: Biblical families and us**

Divide your students into 4 groups, and have them research in chavrutot for 10 minutes one of the following four biblical families:

- Adam and Eve, and their children
- Avraham and Sarah, and their family unit
- Yitzchak and Rivkah, and their family unit
- Yaakov and his four wives, and their 13 children

Ask each of the groups to write down examples of love and loyalty in these families, and arguments and tensions, within their assigned family.

Then bring the class back together and ask a chavruta from each of the four groups to present the family they have researched. Ask your students:

- Why the Torah has so many stories of dysfunctional families?
- What impact does this have on us who read and follow these biblical characters as role models?
- Should God have chosen better role models as our forefathers?
- Should the Torah have edited out the imperfect parts of their lives?
- What can we learn from the imperfect parts of their lives?

Then read together as a class the excerpt from Learning to Love, the chapter in Celebrating Life, pp. 99-100 and discuss with your students how Rabbi Sacks would answer those same questions.

**31-45 minutes: Texts from the writings of Rabbi Sacks on the Family**

Send your students back in to their chavrutot to explore the ‘Texts from the Writings of Rabbi Sacks’ section of these Family Resources – in particular, give them the sections entitled “On Family” and “The Family is where we learn to be human”. Ask them to consider what role Rabbi Sacks believes the family structure plays in the development of every human being.
46-55 minutes: Discussion Time

Bring all the pairs and groups back together as a class to discuss this. Encourage your students to quote from Rabbi Sacks during the discussion, and also to bring examples from their own experience in their own families (and refer back to the trigger text also).

56-60 minutes: Summing Up

In the last few minutes of the class ensure your students have understood the following points:

- Family is a core value in Judaism
- The overarching theme of the Book of Bereishit is families
- The families in the book of Bereishit were dysfunctional in many ways because they were real and human.
- There are no perfect families, including the biblical families, and including our own. However, when families are based around values such as love, compassion loyalty and commitment, they are places where we grow and learn how to be humans.
- The dysfunction and tension in our families is where we learn how to grow and develop as humans, and live as imperfect humans in an imperfect world.