



## 2 - Keystones: Rethinking Tanach Pedagogy with Amira Soleimani and Laura Pasek (June 2023)

*Amira Soleimani and Laura Pasek*

*Teachers*

*Hillel Day in Detroit*

Sharon Freundel:

I'm Sharon Freundel, Managing Director of the Jewish Education Innovation Challenge (JEIC). Welcome to JEIC's Keystones Podcast Series. The keystone is the central stone at the summit of an arch, locking the whole together. We believe that a strong Jewish Day School education is what holds the Jewish people together as we look towards the next generation.

In today's episode, we will hear from Amira Soleimani and Laura Pasek, from Hillel Day School in Detroit, in conversation about using intrinsic motivation and research-based literacy practices to cultivate a love of learning Torah.

Amira Soleimani and Laura Pasek:

I want everyone listening to take a moment and imagine that you're about to curl up on the couch with your favorite book. And I'm going to ask, "What would you take with you?" Right, you would take the book, maybe a warm drink, and perhaps a writing utensil?

Now I want you to imagine that you're going to read from the Torah text. Could you do that type of powerful reading and study in the same way on the couch, cozy and warm? Or does the paradigm look different in your head with the Torah? And more importantly, could your students at a day school graduate picking up the *Tanakh* and really getting to the meat of a story by themselves? Do they have the skills? Do they have the ability? And do they have the understanding of how to unpack the most profound text in Judaism?

At a certain point, I came to understand that we do not always approach Torah study using best educational practices. Look, the situation in today's world feels dire in the field of education. It's post-COVID. There are studies done not only in Jewish day schools, but across schools in North America, there is a gap in reading skills in this country. When we go to see who's available in the market of Jewish educators, more and more, and I experience this every day,





more and more, the pool is dwindling. There aren't a ton of teachers coming into Jewish Studies. And my question is, what are we going to do as the field of Jewish Studies and day schools to try and resolve this challenge? Not a lot of teachers, not a lot of skills to work with, the time of Jewish Studies feels like it's constantly shrinking. How can we maintain, sustain, promote this eternal gift that our students have of the Torah? How can we give this to them in a way that helps them nourish their souls and promotes deep and real understanding with the problems that currently face us?

The Tanach Sadna is our solution to all of these challenges.

The goal is as clear and straightforward as possible. We want children to love the *Tanakh*, not only as a book, but as a guide for life.

I used to teach, prior to teaching elementary and middle school, I taught high school. When we send our most prized possession – our children – off into the world, we want them to have a strong inner compass, a strong sense of who they are. And when they aren't sure what to do, that they have values rooted in text of our ancestors, they can look back and say, “Hmm, well, what would Avraham do? What would Sarah do? What about Moshe? How would they handle this?” and allow that thought process to help them create their future.

Many years ago, I was invited by my principal to go into a general studies classroom and see what teaching a text looks like there. And I literally sat on the carpet next to third graders and my mind was blown. There I was watching the way these young souls (these are third graders, eight and nine year olds) got into the core of a text within minutes, using very simple strategies, and they were actively engaged, and they were the ones owning the learning.

And I thought to myself, “What's going on in Jewish Studies, what's going on in Torah, that in all these arenas where I've been trained by amazing professionals, I haven't encountered the tried and true and tested strategies that exist in reading, in general studies?”

And so we're believers, we need to pull these universal reading skills into Judaic studies, into Torah classes, so that when we ask students to get into the kishkes of a text, they're making the connections with their mind, understanding how to implement strategies that they use all day long, to help them unearth the meaning, and that doesn't mean that we let go of any of the richness and beauty of biblical Hebrew grammar.

My pulse radiates and jumps and moves for the binyanim and for prefixes and suffixes, and in this approach, it's really all about empowering the students, so the lesson starts with a very



short mini lesson, again, using the workshop model – this is what's used in math programs, this is what's used in reading programs, I can go on – it starts with a short lesson, sometimes it's biblical-grammar focused. We treat it like a science, we make sure that all students, regardless of their Hebrew background, feel the confidence to really get into the text through navigating the Hebrew.

And what's really interesting is that I come from a general studies background where I taught in Jewish day schools on the general studies side for over a decade, and it was really an interesting challenge for me to come in and teach Torah. However, the workshop model was very familiar to me, and the literacy skills were very familiar to me. So it made it made a ton of sense when I came in, and I was able to use this very meaningful text, and approach it in a very academically rigorous way, using familiar models like mapping a story on a story mountain, or tracking characters over time, or finding different themes in a text or categorizing what a character says and what a character does.

But with the Torah, we're able to take it a step further, because it's so important to us as Jews, I'm able to take it a step further and really bring in those Jewish values. So we look at how Avraham treats guests, and then we connect that to our Jewish values, and we then go and explore how we treat guests in our school. So it was really just a culmination of social emotional learning, Jewish values, literacy skills, and rigorous biblical skills.

Students are able to choose a level that works for them - that's a big component of the program is that they can choose a level that has an amount of Hebrew that really works for them understanding the story and reinforcing their Hebrew skills. And we work through a certain theme or a certain skill. They really get into these interpretive questions that they can actually have different opinions on. It's not just finding, for sure answering the text, it's more about evaluating – Why did the character do this? How does the character change over time? – those really, really rich, interpretive, deep questions that you might see in a novel study, we do the same thing in Torah study.

This program and this approach brings in, not only best practices from literacy instruction, but also from social emotional learning. So they're actually learning skills to go through different choices within a dilemma, to look to their support network to help them work through challenges and obstacles, and what happens throughout the program is they will learn and derive meaning from a story and then apply it to their own lives. So for example, we'll read a story about Avraham negotiating with God about the people of Sodom, and then we come up with our own kind of school-related dilemma that might have to do with that and ask ourselves, "What does my Avraham have to say about that? Would Avraham be more on the forgiving side, or more on



the strict side?” And we came up with this idea of the teacher deciding to cancel everybody's recess because three kids were really acting out and no Avraham would want us to be more forgiving.

And then at the end of the third grade unit, we found a meaningful culminating project, and this is really where this approach can work for different schools, is each school can do what works for them. So for our school, we really wanted to go around and see where Avraham's legacies are still carrying on to this day. So we studied how Avraham was hospitable to guests, and then we looked in our school: Where's our evidence that we're hospitable to guests? What can we do at home to be hospitable to guests? So really is scaffolded throughout, applying these lessons is models of Jewish values.

If I could leave the listener with one thing, I would want to leave everyone here with this. So often in Jewish day schools, we are asked: You have two subject matters, one day – what gets lost? And I think the Sadna is a very deliberate and intentional approach as a response that says, “Nothing is lost. It's about what is gained.” You can study Jewish Studies and still have all the beauty and all the uniqueness of what makes the core of our religion so profoundly magical. And you can use that time to bolster reading skills, interpretive skills, and universal skills that exist naturally in multiple subject matters.

One thing that's really incredible to see is the impact that this program has had over the last couple of years that we've been using it. Students went from passive listeners of Torah stories, where they were not given the opportunity to work with the actual text, where they were being told the commentary and the interpretation and really deprived of that interpretive process to a scenario in which students are excited about Torah. They look forward to Torah. We have had parents reach out to say how meaningful their students find Torah study, and how they're hearing about it much more at home, and it really has shifted. And our ultimate goal, as Amira mentioned, is to have students love Torah.

Sharon Freundel:

To find out more about this topic and other ways to catalyze radical improvement in Jewish Day Schools, please visit our website at [JewishChallenge.org](http://JewishChallenge.org).

