



7 - Keystones: Celebrating Hebrew Instruction with Rabbi Andrew Ergas (November 2023)

*Rabbi Andrew Ergas
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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 Andrew Ergas from Hebrew at the Center on shifting the narrative around Hebrew language instruction and reimagining what is possible through systematized thinking and frameworks.

Rabbi Andrew Ergas:

Well, we certainly can point to schools that invest time and money and still don't see the kind of student outcomes that they want. There actually are wonderful, successful stories, and we need to begin to retell those stories and change the narrative. It turns out that students learn this language in the same way that they become effective and articulate speakers of English. We want them to not only learn how to speak and to understand, but to be able to use Hebrew to unpack Jewish culture and, obviously, become creators of Jewish and Hebrew culture as well.

We have a wonderful phrase in contemporary Hebrew that translates to, "If you do something, [and] you don't tell people about it, it's as if it never happened." So I think, first and foremost, we need to go and identify those places where these successes are happening, whether it's a success on an individual basis, it's a teacher who's particularly impactful, it's a school that sees their Hebrew goals and their student outcomes in alignment. It's about attitudes and behaviors about Hebrew – if they become effective Hebrew students but never want to use it, then we've really failed. It's about clarifying what success looks like, and then when we find those examples, broadcasting them, inspiring people, using other schools, other teachers, parents, all of the key stakeholders to see that it is possible to do.



And we have found, we've been working for 15 years now across North America, working with day schools that want to do better, they want to take the already existing resources – their staff, the hours per week – and maximize the kind of impact that can be had.

Much of our focus is on working with the teachers. We know that, at the end of the day, great education rises and falls on the effectiveness of the teachers. So if we can help clarify for those teachers what those goals look like, then give them the specific tools to accomplish the kind of educational process that leads to those outcomes, we will begin to see that success. And then we want to celebrate it.

We want to recognize it; we want to hand out awards. In the same way that many schools have a *siddur* assembly or a *chumash* assembly, we want to make certain that Hebrew and Hebrew teachers and the Hebrew learners are being lifted up and showing that the basic value proposition of Jewish Day School education, which of course always includes Hebrew, is successful as well.

For Hebrew at the center, there's really three components that I think reflect the newest phase of thinking about this. While we continue to do a lot of work with individual schools, helping them accomplish their goals, we're trying to build more and more community-wide endeavors so that there are more people involved in this as stakeholders, not just the Hebrew department in a particular school, which in many cases is not necessarily the center of power for cultural change. So that's certainly one piece of it.

The second piece that's really important to us is work that we're doing by bringing together most of the key players in the field of Hebrew language education and doing the kind of field building that will allow this approach to mature. You know, 140 years ago, lots of people could say they were doctors and they could put leeches on you or drain blood or sell you a tonic. And, eventually, the American Medical Association was organized and they developed what are the key areas of competency that everybody needs to know. What are the different levels of credentials? How do we differentiate between somebody who's a true doctor and somebody who's a quack? What are the different levels, you know, between a licensed nurse and a registered nurse and a nurse practitioner, a mature recognized profession. That is work that we have to be doing in the Hebrew language education space. And we're doing that by putting together courses we've developed with our field partners, the 10 competencies that really outline what are the areas of expertise of knowledge and practice.

And then that the third piece is to take these stories and replicate them, bring them to others, bring them to decision makers, bring them to funders, bring them to community leaders, to see that it's both possible and that Hebrew is one of these unique tools that can enable all types of



other communal priorities. Connection to Hebrew is connection to Israel. Connection to Hebrew is connection to text. Connection to Hebrew is connection to values.

About a dozen years ago, Hebrew at the Center did a field scan to see who was assessing actual language proficiency, not performance, language performance, not unimportant...But if I give you a worksheet, I can say, "Oh, you've performed that task well," but if I drop you off in a restaurant and Hebrew speaking environment, and the menu doesn't look exactly like that worksheet, it's not clear you'll be able to spontaneously create meaning and use the language to accomplish your goals. So we did a market scan to see who is effectively assessing all four language skills in Hebrew language learning – reading, writing, speaking, oral comprehension.

There was an amazing project going on on the west coast, run by an organization called Avant. And Hebrew at the Center made a three quarter of a million dollar investment to take that assessment tool, which was designed for 41 other languages, and it now functions as a very effective proficiency assessment system for Hebrew language.

We've worked with Rosov Consulting. We've developed assessments that allow us to understand attitudes and behaviors around Hebrew, and we bring that assessment tool to not only understand about students, but about their teachers and about their parents, and then to work with school leaders to identify the gaps or the differences and how do we bring everyone into alignment so everybody's working in an objective way towards the same direction.

We helped take an approach for early childhood, and we call it ELOPA-style. We took the ELOPA approach, and we developed a way to effectively assess objectively how younger people in preK, K, first, second – who are not yet at that stage where they're reading and writing – how do we understand their oral comprehension?

These are all the types of tools that most importantly can then inform instruction. If this is a school where *kriah* is more important, how do we make certain that the teachers are getting the kind of professional learning opportunities, mentoring, coaching, training, etc. to move the needle in that particular skill? If it's a school that's most interested in seeing their graduates be able to carry on a rich conversation, beyond body parts and colors, beyond nouns, but to be able to include effective modifiers and whatnot, then we can use these data to inform that kind of instruction, and ultimately begin to build a cycle of virtue where we're using that information to inform instruction, we see the results in the student outcomes, we assess it again. And that's how we begin to demystify, what for many people seems magical. And good Hebrew can't just be because the teacher was beloved; it really needs to be about the same sort of serious student outcomes we would expect in the sciences, that we would expect in the language arts, that we would expect in all other aspects of quality Jewish education.



Really broadly, I think we have to ask ourselves, what type of Jewish future are we creating in the Jewish Day School? North American Jews begin to say, Hebrew is a part of my normative understanding of what being a part of the Jewish people is, that would be great. But that's the question – what kind of Jewish future are we building, and in Jewish Day Schools where nowhere is more time being spent on dedicated Hebrew instruction, that is the place where we can maximize the kind of impact, the kind of outcomes, and create a Jewish community that will be recognized 200, 300, 500 years from now. It's one of the places that is a significant contributor to Hebrew and Jewish culture.

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.