



4 - Keystones: Cultivating Dispositions of Respect with Bat Sheva Miller and Dana Keil (August 2023)

Bat Sheva Miller and Dana Keil

Upper School Director and Lower School Director

Luria Academy in New York

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 Bat Sheva Miller and Dana Keil from Luria Academy in Brooklyn in conversation about the four commitments of unconditional respect that inspire their community.

Bat Sheva Miller and Dana Keil:

Bat Sheva: So Dana, we're here together to talk about the four commitments, and I'd love to hear from you how this idea of the four commitments came up before.

Dana: So the full name of the four commitments is actually the "Four Commitments of Unconditional Respect," and it started from the idea of wanting to have a similar framework for how we talk about respect across the ages in a developmentally appropriate way, in addition to staff and to parents, so that all the stakeholders had common language to use when talking about respect.

Bat Sheva: How did that...How was that triggered? Why respect?

Dana: I think it has a lot to do with the language that was being used across the school and wanting to have it as a teachable moment for the whole community on how we can speak to each other in respectful terms.





Bat Sheva: Can you tell us what the four commitments are?

Dana: Sure. So for most of the school, including parents and staff, the four commitments are: “I will be kind, I will be curious, I will be strong, and I will contribute.” The only difference we have is for primary, our preschool students, because they’re naturally curious, that’s replaced with “I will be calm”, which is obviously very essential for two- to five-year olds.

Bat Sheva: So you just said you have the four commitments for parents, for faculty, and for students. Are they different?

Dana: So the commitments are the same. The language, though, we wanted to create into a developmentally appropriate way. So for example, our kindergarten and first grade students, which we call the five- to seven-age band by their age, “I will be kind” sounds like, “This means I am patient and listen to my friends and teachers. I respect that everyone gets what they need in our classroom,” versus Upper School students.

Bat Sheva: Well, that will be me. And this, I know that that’s what we try to convey to them is that “I’ll be kind” will mean, “This means I treat myself and others with patience, empathy, and an understanding that everyone gets what they need.”

Dana: So it’s a similar sentiment, but it’s written in an age-appropriate way for the different stakeholders and the different ages.

Bat Sheva: How do you think they play in the everyday life of the school?

Dana: So we definitely use the four commitments when we’re speaking to students, calling students out to give them positive reinforcement – “Hey, I noticed that you contributed to the classroom by picking up that pencil, even though it wasn’t yours. Thank you.” That would just be kind of one example of how we see it in day-to-day life.

Bat Sheva: It’s interesting, you gave an example of the “I contribute” because I’ve been thinking a lot about how to bring the commitment of contribute to faculty as well as students – What does that mean to be part of an organization or a school or an educational system, where we have a very strong intentional sense of contributing? So how would you define “I contribute” when it comes to faculty, for instance?



Dana: Sure, so for faculty, “I will contribute” sounds like, “This means I bring my best self and am a partner in the joy and success of Luria Academy.” That’s obviously a very idealistic phrasing. I think in terms of the day-to-day life of teachers, it means like, “I’m covering for my friend if they need to take another five-minute walk around the block,” or “I will push in chairs of a classroom that’s not even mine, but I noticed that the chairs were left out.” It’s just a way that you’re showing that you’re a member of the community and you want to treat the school building and the school culture as a place that you are a full member of and that you respect and that you want to invest in, that you want to be there.

Bat Sheva: I think that is particularly relevant in middle school years where, developmentally speaking, the students are, in that time of their lives, that they were really so focused on themselves on their peers, and they are just...their social selves are motivating their actions, and to just bring back that sense of contributing, meaning there’s a world outside of you. It’s 100% developmentally appropriate, in addition to just really creating this awareness of the reality around, and the people around, and the environment around the spaces. So I know that some of the words that are defined, that define this aspect of “contribute” are productivity, conscientious, in this Jewish community, gratitude, equity of voice, which I think is so important, because part of being...and I noticed that equity of voice is actually in more than one, if I’m not mistaken, it’s also in “kindness” and “being kind”, and I think there was another one. Oh, I see, it’s also in “strong.”

Dana: I would say, of all of these, “I will be strong” is something that I think we spend most of our time working on. When seven-year olds think of strength, they often think of “I can carry the most” or “I can run the fastest,” and part of what we’re trying to teach in this commitment is actually not physical strength, but emotional and psychological strength – so grit, mindfulness, responsibility, self control. One of the major things that we’re working on in this age group is self-regulation, and for the kids who are not quite there yet, co-regulation with the help of an adult. But “I will be strong”, I think, is something that we spent a lot of time focusing on in Lower School.

Bat Sheva: Can you give an example of how you teach this?

Dana: Sure. So we like to use real-life examples because those are the best teachable moments. So for a student who’s saying, “This writing assignment is too long for me, I can’t do it,” one instinct might be to say, “No problem, instead of writing a five-sentence paragraph, let’s only write a three-sentence one.” But by using the commitment of “strong” to then give language to the student, we could say, “I know that writing is hard for you. I know that requires a lot of grit



and a lot of stamina. We can break this up into chunks so that your hand is not so tired. But I know that you can write all five sentences, and I'm here to help you and support you with that. You're really strong and you can do it," and by using that commitment, we're utilizing common language that the student is already comfortable with, and they know what that means. They know the vocabulary words that surround that sentiment, and they set goals themselves. *Rosh HaShanah* is a really important time of the year that students will often set four commitment goals for themselves. And then, again, in my age band that sometimes looks like, "I will be strong by memorizing all of the multiplication tables," or "I will be curious by learning more about South America and culture." It's really amazing to see the way that the kids will then use the language that we have taught them to challenge themselves and to own their learning.

Bat Sheva: Did you feel that those four commitments had an impact on you as a person and as an educator?

Dana: Yes, I think that in different points of my career, and also thinking about being in this role over COVID, which obviously had its own challenges, kind of my focus on which commitment I wanted to set goals for myself has changed over those four years. I think that when I first started out, I was like, "You know what, I want to be strong. I want to, like, go at this with gusto. I want to be everything to everyone." And especially coming out of those COVID moments, I think sometimes my goals for myself were to be kind and to be kind to myself. And it's okay, if I can't do everything all the time. As long as let's be you.

Bat Sheva: Being human.

Dana: Yes, being human. Absolutely. So actually, I should have mentioned this beginning in terms of how we came up with this. This was also part of our *middot* curriculum. We didn't use that language in terms of *middah* or *middot*. We instead chose to call it a commitment. But it really, that's where it comes from. And that whole *mussar* movement of challenging yourself to make yourself better is obviously very Jewish ideals, even if we're not using that same language.

Bat Sheva: I think I want to add that in *Bereishit*, in Genesis, when we learned that Hashem created Adam, you know, *b'tzalmo*, that God created humans according to His image. And a lot of these adjectives, a lot of these definitions or definitions that we see throughout the text as defining God. Or, this image of what is to be what is to be a person in *shelemut* and in wholeness. So I don't know that I can't...I wasn't at the process of making this happen, but when we look at these *middot* or character traits or what makes a person be a full human, I don't know



that is just Jewish; I think is part of just being a person in the world and navigating the world with all these different attributes that are part of living in society and living with a community, Jewish community or non-Jewish community. I think that is also Jewish, to be part of the world is also Jewish.

Sharon Freundel:

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