



### 3 - Keystones: Bringing Jewish Law and Practice to Life with Jason Feld (July 2023)

*Jason Feld*  
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*Incoming Head of School*  
*Akiba Yavneh in Dallas*

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 Jason Feld, former Head of School of Northwest Yeshiva High School in Seattle and incoming Head of School of Akiba Yavneh in Dallas, on bringing experiential education to the teaching of rabbinics, creating more authentic learning.

Jason Feld:

I wanted to share a little bit about a pilot program that I've developed over the last few years called the XBM or the Experiential Beit Midrash. And the way that that came about for me is looking at high school students learning about Jewish law and practice. It struck me one day, a memory from when I was a young young kid. My parents tasked my brother, my older brother, to teach me how to ride a bike, and my brother was a teenager at the time and wasn't all that interested. So he came up with this brilliant idea that he was going to sit me down and explain to me how to ride a bike and then send me out on my own to figure it out.

And that memory of that experience really helped inform what I've been developing with XBM, with the Experiential Beit Midrash, that pedagogically we know that when it comes to practice of doing, learning it in a classroom as a text can only go so far. And so, I really wanted to bring the experience front and center in our learning of Jewish law and practice. And so the XBM is a way for our student community to do that.





Some examples, what we started out with a number of years ago was learning the laws of what makes a *sukkah* kosher and then created a design lab where students were designing their own *sukkot* using materials that we provided, found materials – recycled cans, plastic, whatnot – and they had to build a kosher *sukkah*, using the materials that were needed. And it was an incredible experience because it was interdisciplinary, and our students were bringing in both the design thinking and math and geometry, obviously. But really what it was, was a summative assessment of the texts that they were learning in their Judaics classes.

Fast forward, the program has actually developed quite a bit where we have now, we've transformed the campus into a working farm. We call it our homestead, or our *kibbutz*. And so we have a beehive, and we grow our own vegetables on campus. We have a chicken coop, and we've developed a program, both through our core courses – AP Environmental Science, our Judaics – but also students have actually taken this on and developed their own clubs, a sustainability club, where they use the farm for either food in school or also as fundraisers.

And the XBM has been pivotal in that. So, for example, our senior class is raising money for their Poland/Israel experience, and they're selling honey from our NYHS beehive. And some students also decided to create varieties with the honey and a group infused some of the honey with hot peppers that we also grow on campus. And that created an amazing learning opportunity – if you cut a hot pepper with a knife, and then put it into the honey, if you use a meat knife, is the honey now *b'sari*? Is it, you know, *fleischig* or is it pareve? And it turns out our students learned that with the hot pepper, actually, it does transfer. And so they recognize now that something as simple as cutting a pepper and putting it into a jar of amazing, beautiful honey has Jewish halachic implications. And learning that on a source sheet in a classroom is one thing, learning it from experience is another.

This year, we have an ambitious summative assessment, where our students are learning about the laws of Shabbat, and at the end of the unit, we're actually going to do a multi-day camping trip. Again, we're in the Pacific Northwest, it's gorgeous, wonderful places to go hiking and camping. Well, our students are actually going to learn how to set up a campsite on their own and make Shabbat. And so how to create an *eruv*, the cooking, all of the preparations necessary for Shabbat in the wild. And that's actually going to be their final exam.

And so, pedagogically, what we know to be true, I see in practice. One, when students are able to transfer knowledge from one domain to another, that actually creates deeper, deeper retention and deeper understanding, and when the assessments are authentic, (when I'm



speaking to the students) when they have real skin in the game, it then becomes something both more real and more natural and sticking.

And so what I'm trying to do is really build that bridge between the text study and the practice that we have in our own homes, the traditions that have been passed down, and create that space where our students are learning by doing. And our faculty are also learning by doing as well, which is one of the great benefits.

We have a significant population at NYHS from the Sephardic Ladino community, and through that example of the hot peppers in the infused honey, turns out that the Ashkenazic tradition of, you know, whether or not the product coming from the knife is milk or meat, there are variances within the Sephardic and Ashkenazic traditions. And so that's something that we're learning, again, as our students are bringing in traditions from their homes, it's helping to inform all of our learning.

The other aspect we're talking about in outcomes is really building a strong community of learners. And so the experiences that we have actually help build that stronger school culture. And so we have a series of experiences that we do every year, from 9th grade through 12th. Starts with a multi-day sailing trip through the islands, the San Juan Islands, where our students spend a couple of days working on the sailboat. One of their first tasks with a Judaic Studies faculty is actually making the galley kosher. And so they're ready to go on to their dorm in, you know, when they go to university and make their little kitchen kosher. And that kind of follows throughout until the senior year where we have a capstone experience.

Last year, we took the seniors to Romania to help out Ukrainian Jewish orphans who became refugees because of the war. We were one of the first delegations on the ground, helping. And this year, the plan is to go to Poland and Israel.

And so the learning actually becomes an integral part of the school culture and building that camaraderie between both, kind of, the students and their grades, but also the relationships which are super important – the students and the faculty, and the faculty as a whole, not just Judaics and general studies.

My two pieces of advice are, one, don't get caught up on all of the things that could go wrong. There is something to be said for just jumping in and trying and refining and learning from that, so don't be intimidated. We know what good learning looks like. We know the power of experiences in creating the learning; the logistics and tactical will work itself out.





The second is to remember that, at the core of what we're doing, is a learning experience. And so sometimes folks will think about, "Well, the learning happens in the classroom, and the experiences are for school spirit." But actually what happens outside of the classroom could become very, very powerful learning experiences, so open up your mind to those possibilities.

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).