



6 - Keystones: Supporting Student Mental Health with Olivia Friedman (October 2023)

Olivia Friedman

Teacher and Facilitator for Erica's Lighthouse

Ida Crown Jewish Academy in Chicago

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 Olivia Friedman from Ida Crown Jewish Academy in Chicago on providing resources and opportunities for students in the area of mental health in ways that are accessible and comfortable for students.

Olivia Friedman:

I am a huge advocate for student-led mental health clubs and hope that more Jewish day schools, and especially high schools, promote them and bring them to their school. The reason for this is because this is a low-cost, high-impact intervention that enables students to talk about mental health and also get access to accurate information about mental health. Many schools already have therapists or social workers in the building, but the problem is that the issue of stigma is very real, and therefore, many students may not feel comfortable dropping into the social worker or therapist's office. There may be a concern that someone will see me, or what does it mean for me that I walked in? But if you have fellow students running events and running programs and sharing accurate, vetted information about topics like talking about depression, it becomes part of the culture of the school, such that students understand that these are topics that are real and that can be discussed, and, perhaps, someone who doesn't feel comfortable reaching out to a social worker or a therapist will feel comfortable reaching out to one of the board members. And the board members to our students have been trained about what is their role and what is not their role, and when they need to escalate things up to an adult or to the social worker in the school, so they can provide that comfortable liaison to make sure that people are not falling through the cracks.



The story behind how I got involved in this, given that officially I'm a Judaic Studies teacher, is relatively personal to me and my students at the school. Here's what happened. I've always been interested in mental health and helping students feel less lonely and more connected. And, nowadays, really before the pandemic, but certainly exacerbated by the pandemic and social media, mental health in teenagers is really at a problematic place. One in four teenagers, that's 25%, are dealing with some kind of mental health issue, whether that's anxiety or depression or something that might present in an even more severe fashion.

And what happened to us in Chicago is that we had a beloved student at the school, and her family's very open about it, so I can use her name. Her name was Batsheva Stadlan. And Batsheva, unbeknownst to us, had an eating disorder and also anxiety, and after graduating from the school, and actually going on her Israel program, she took her own life. And that rocked the entire Chicago community, and it especially upset me because I had taught her in a seven-person class, and, therefore, I had thought that I had known her very well. And the way that Batsheva had presented in class was joyful and bubbly, and I would never have suspected that she was actually struggling with all of these things in her life, which was as she wished it. Meaning sometimes people don't want to show up in their spaces at school with all of the different difficulties that they may be facing, and they want to be treated as a more typical student, and that's someone's right. But what Rabbi Marianne Novak, who is her mother, has said is that she felt like Batsheva was lonely and that she couldn't confide in her peers or didn't feel like she had a support system in her friends because she didn't think that people would have understood what it was that she was dealing with.

After this happened, other students in the school came forward, and they came to me and they said, "Something needs to be done." Right, there has to be a situation where, hopefully, of course, we can prevent suicide completely, but even if you can't prevent it because there's a variety of factors that go into someone making the decision to take their life, so that this is something where if people are struggling, people feel like it's okay to talk about, that people can talk to their friends about it, and hopefully gain more support.

Really, the idea came from the students. And the reason they brought it to me is just because they knew that this was a topic I was interested in anyway. And so we started to think about what could we do? What would be a useful intervention? And we did some research, and this is when we realized that there are actually national programs that exist that provide funding for students to create student-led mental health clubs. And two of the best known ones are *Bring Change to Mind* and *Erica's Lighthouse*. *Bring Change to Mind* will even offer students \$500 to run programming each year, and there's a national summit that they can attend where they can network with other leaders and other day schools, and this is not a Jewish program – just day schools around the country or public schools around the country. And then *Erica's Lighthouse* is



local. It's in Winnetka, Illinois. It's a very similar program, except it's \$250 per year in terms of the funding.

I asked the students what they wanted to do. And they were interested in the local option, *Erica's Lighthouse*, because that would enable us to bring in speakers. And so we got started.

The beginning, we didn't quite know what we were doing. We knew that we wanted to deploy a program. We knew we wanted to have student leadership. But what would it look like? Through a series of trial and error and running different kinds of programs in our school, which has 215 students, what we discovered was that the most effective mechanism of reaching people within the school was "lunch and learns". And what we would do is we would pick a topic. For example, talking about anxiety, and each of the students would research a specific factor there. They might focus on signs and symptoms of anxiety. What's the difference between anxiety that is functional, like everyone has some measure of anxiety in their life that is actually helpful, and it's to some degree healthy, versus when it's at a clinical level where it might need outside treatment. How do you support a friend who's struggling with anxiety? And then we had a student who came forward and shared their personal story of living with anxiety.

All of that was vetted by our school therapists before we presented it. And then we had either pizza or sushi to make students want to come. And then we presented. And that got really lots of good feedback from students (a) because they felt like they weren't alone in their struggle, (b) because they were getting accurate information about, hmm...you know, what is the anxiety that I'm experiencing? And is it good or is it bad? And then once we had the "lunch and learn" model, we added on other models to it. Sometimes we do positivity, promotional activities – a favorite one is bringing in the therapy dogs to come and play with the students usually around finals time. And it's really grown off of that core model. That's the model for our school, which is only 215 students, but this type of intervention can work at all different kinds of schools.

At the Prizmah Virtual Mental Health Summit last year, we talked about this. And specifically, we talked about how Frisch, which is a school that has over 1000 students, has a mental health board, and how they program longer events and the kinds of events that they've done. We had Bi-Cultural Hebrew Academy, which is a small school that had maybe 50 students in the high school, and the kinds of events that they did. And so hearing from the students was powerful for teachers to realize that this is an intervention that works no matter the size of the school, no matter the denomination of the school, and that students really feel empowered, and like they're making a difference.

I think that this entire initiative is very Jewish, in that we are taught in Devarim/Deuteronomy: *v'nishmartem me'od l'nafshoteichem* which means that "you should guard your souls." And



we're also taught a concept of *kol Yisrael areivim zeh lazeh*, "everyone is responsible for one another." And especially now, I think that these are ideas and dictums that we're trying to teach to our students anyway, as members of Jewish institutions, and this is a way that they can really put it into practice. Here are students helping other students. Here are students helping their peers feel less alone, more connected, more integrated, and just like they've got people that they can share with and talk to, and that these taboo topics are not actually so taboo. And what seems like this very dark experience someone may go through is something that could be shared. And most times just knowing that it can be shared or that there is a person that you could talk to for support can be comforting to the student who is struggling.

And then more specifically, I think that many of the characters and the narratives that we learn about in our texts, especially in *navi*, which is prophets, have a lot of these struggles. I teach *Sefer Shmuel*, which is the book of Samuel, and *Shaul* [Saul] is clearly struggling with the *ruach ra*, which is interpreted as an evil spirit, but we would, nowadays, associate much more with some form of mental health struggle. And there's even in the traditional commentaries, they talk about him having some form of melancholy or depression when the spirit of God left him. We have *Eliyahu* or Elijah, who gives up after *Izevel* [Jezebel] sends him this death threat – he just goes off into the desert, and he tells God, "I think that you should take my life. I think I'm done." And he seems to have these cognitive distortions because he'll say things like, "Well, everyone's out to get me. Everyone wants to kill me," this catastrophizing, which is not true. It's actually *Izevel*, specifically, who wants to kill him, and he's just had a major triumph, because on Mount Carmel, he has just persuaded members of the nation to believe in the one God, but rather than focusing on that triumph that he's just had, he's focusing on all the negatives and everything where he feels like he's failing. And so when I teach those units, I try to bring those examples to the students so that they can see that, yes, this is an ancient text, but even these holy people that we've seen in the past, were struggling with some of these issues that, perhaps, you or a friend might be struggling with now.

The ideas at this point are student-generated. I very much work off of what students are interested in. Sometimes the students themselves will make explicit connections. For example, one of the issues that students would like to talk about is religion-based anxiety, which is where on the one hand, you have people in the school teaching certain ideas and dictums as this is the word of God, and this is what God wants you. But on the other hand, let's say that the student isn't living up to it, and they may start to feel very anxious about that – where is the line between some normal level of, perhaps this is something to aspire to, even if I'm not keeping it yet, versus maybe this is not helpful for me to even be thinking about, because I'm spending so much time ruminating over this and thinking of myself as a bad person who might go to *gehennom*, [hell] that this isn't a good thing. And so we've been discussing about possibly bringing in a rabbi who is also a social worker to potentially discuss that particular issue.



Sometimes there's a more obvious intersection like that. And sometimes it's less obvious, but it's still within the realm of caring for and taking care of one another.

I just want to thank Prizmah because they actually had myself and my colleague, Mark Fein, write a playbook that goes through all these resources on what is *Erica's Lighthouse* and what is *Bring Change to Mind* and what other resources exist, that might be of interest, where could you find speakers if you want to invite speakers on Zoom or in person to your school? I do want to encourage anyone listening to this podcast to go look at the Prizmah Mental Health Playbook. It's relatively simple to implement, and it can really have a very positive impact.

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.