



1 - Keystones: Re-Envisioning Tefillah Education through Virtual Reality with Oren Kaunfer (May 2023)

Oren Kaunfer
Madrich Ruchani
JCDS in Boston

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 Oren Kaunfer, the *Madrich Ruchani* at the Jewish Community Day School in Boston, on taking *tefillah* off the page and exploring the connection between place and prayer and other paths.

Oren Kaunfer:

I think there's a big value in trying to teach kids that *tefillah* does not necessarily have to take place all the time in the *siddur*, in a chair, in the *Beit Knesset*. So a lot of my work is around taking *tefillah* off the page, and I do it in various different ways.

I'm really, since I got there, I was very interested in trying to find moments of emotion and feeling and kind of cross pollinate that with *tefillah*.

Music is a big way that I do that. I think music is incredibly important for day schools. It's sort of, I'd say the thread that holds together our day school, and it really it brings people together in joy and sadness and community and excitement. And in all the *chagim* and *tefillot* and *Ivrit* class and in the halls. So that's a huge, huge part of kind of the spiritual life of an adult and a student at JCDS.

But in some of my exploration, I sort of like to experiment with what avenues can we build into *tefillah*, what sort of different paths and roads we can create that'll allow different kids with different interests and ideas to still make their way to the heart of *tefillah*.





And so one of the projects that I've been working on over the last couple of years is something we call them, *Makom VR: Virtual Reality Tefillah*. And it started a couple of years ago because I was interested in virtual reality. Actually, I was working with my colleague at the time Dr. Jared Matas, and we were exploring what was going on with virtual reality at the time. We were really drawn to this idea of presence, where you kind of put on goggles, and suddenly poof, you're in a different location. And so we started wondering: How does where you pray affect how you pray?

So, the Virtual Reality Project, we were lucky enough to get a generous grant from the Covenant Foundation to kind of help us start it off, and we were able to implement this project of basically letting kids find these awe and spirituality-filled moments, by sending them to different beautiful natural locations.

Often when I ask people to describe a moment when they felt connected to God or something bigger than themselves, invariably, I get answers that has to do with, "I was on a mountain" or, "It was the sunrise" or, "I was at camp..the lake was like this." And, you know, it's not always the center of the story, but often a big part of the story is these kind of awe-inspiring natural locations, and there's a lot of research that shows that that can be really beneficial.

So we started thinking about, well, what if we could have the kids suddenly be transported in the middle of *tefillah* to one of these, you know, awe-inspiring locations, and that's what we did.

So we got headsets. JCDS is a place where innovation is encouraged, so this kind of crazy idea turned into a reality. We've got headsets, virtual reality headsets, and what we do is during *tefillah* time, the kids will just take a few minutes where they'll put on the headsets, and they'll choose a location, these kind of wondrous locations, and then they'll be there and then they either sing a *tefillah* or listen to *tefillah*. Usually it's something from *Pesukei d'Zimra* (sort of the early preparatory prayers), and then they're there. And then they get to just be after the prayer is done, they just kind of are there, have a few minutes, and then they take off the goggles, and then they reflect on their experience.

And it's been amazing. Some of the reflections have been:

"I felt like I was more spiritual, and it was easier for me to pray."

"It was really calming, and I felt close to God."

"I felt enlightened because I could marvel at God's creations."

I mean, these aren't really things you hear middle school students saying at a Jewish Day School when talking about *tefillah* time, or maybe it is in other schools. I mean, we actually, I



think, have a pretty robust and successful *tefillah* program at JCDS, but even this was kind of surprising for us.

So, we continue to work with it, and it's been really kind of wonderful and eye opening, and even though it's not something that we do all the time, like the goal is not to have a davening community that wears headsets in the *Beit Knesset*. The goal is actually more about how does the time in the headset change their spiritual life out of the headset. And so that's really what we are working towards. And we're just, you know, basically trying to generate these moments of awe and spirituality for the kids, and then they can kind of take that into other other times in their lives.

I don't have any hard evidence for the story being connected to the Virtual Reality *Tefillah*, but since we do a lot of work on trying to connect the students' emotional and mindful and spiritual experience with *tefillah* making them, you know, part and parcel of the law. I was with the seventh grade last spring, and we're on a camping trip, and we went on a hike the first day and you come (we're at Isabella Freedman), and they hadn't been to Isabella Freedman in sixth grade like many kids because of the pandemic. So it was their first time there, and there's this kind of beautiful vista, and they came upon the vista, and this was a group that had been doing this project when they were in sixth grade and part of seventh grade. They came upon the vista, and, unprompted, they started singing the very same *tefillah* that we had been using in the headsets. I don't know if it's connected, but it was certainly an encouraging moment where they were in a moment of awe, and they went to *tefillah*. To me that was kind of a that showed some sort of success in my work.

But this isn't the only thing we do in *tefillah*. This is just kind of like one example of the creative inroads we make. We have lots of different creative expressions of *tefillah*. We have a few elective programs, like many other schools, with all sorts of different options for the kids once a week. We did, we're a pilot school with the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, and worked a lot on bringing mindfulness into the school and it remains there. And then we do sort of whenever, you know, we can kind of come up with another exciting idea that might turn people on, we do it. We've done a coding *tefillah* elective where kids have coded web-based apps that would enhance the experience. So that's sort of a taste of some of the things we're doing. We're trying to kind of not necessarily redefine, but just give a broader definition of what *tefillah* could be.

The whole journey of *tefillah*, whether you're in a regular, you know, very traditional *tefillah* setting or a creative, innovative one, it's always going to be about balancing the moments of individual and the moments of communal. And so I think that's actually just really made very concrete in this experiment where they don't really spend more than about five minutes in the



virtual reality. And then the way we have it set up right now, they start off, just a few kids will start off, they'll do the virtual reality thing for like five minutes, and they'll join into the rest of the communal view. So it's sort of both, but one of the really interesting findings that I didn't expect when we did it was their reflections. Many of the kids reflected on how they appreciated the solitude, which was so interesting because you think of kids always as these social beings, and it just really put a spotlight on how often they are just surrounded by other humans. And so I think that's why we've had success with the mindfulness work we've done and also that that was an interesting finding in the VR.

We developed this VR app, like our own little app for this project, and one of the latest features we added in was actually putting...so you're at the beach, and it's the sunrise, and you like feel like you're there and then you can press a button and the text of the *tefillah* comes up. And so I think that's actually a very visual, clear reminder of the *keva* and the *kavannah*. Like you're in this awe-inspiring location where we're drawing a very concrete connection between words of *tefillah* and that experience.

So the last exciting thing I want to mention is that we are actually excited at Prizmah announced that we're giving away the materials at no charge. So you can get the VR app. You can get the four lessons, a curriculum, the reflection forms, and we'll train you on how to use it, and we don't give away the headsets. You're on your own for that.

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.