



8 - Keystones: Engaging in Productive Argument with Robbie Gringras (December 2023)

Robbie Gringras

Director

For the Sake of Argument

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 Robbie Gringras from For the Sake of Argument on using healthy argument as a path for growth.

Robbie Gringras:

There are two elements to our work. One is how to have healthy arguments, and the other one is how to learn through arguments.

We get a bit of pushback about the word – using the word “argument.” It feels like people are so concerned about having arguments they're frightened even of the word itself – it's the “a-word.” And I think what we realized is that there are three kinds of argument, and that's why people are pulling back from the idea of the word.

Mostly we use the word “argument” because we want to suggest that emotions are allowed. The emotions have to have a place at the table, not necessarily a veto. And we need to work out how emotion or passion can be involved. But I know my wife – native born Israeli – whenever I say to her, “Stop getting so emotional, stop shouting or whatever,” she says, “Well, okay, I'm bored now.” And at the end of the day, if we're having a disagreement, but our emotions aren't involved, it probably means we care less about it. And we do want Israel to be something which is central to someone's identity or any issues to do with Jewish identity. Of course, it's going to involve emotions as well.



So how do we bring them to the table?

One of our understandings is that there are three kinds of argument. There's a debate, and a debate, the aim is that I convince you, okay? There's another kind of argument or what's often euphemized as a difficult conversation, and that's kind of the umbrella word I'd use would be a negotiation. That's where we want to come to an agreement, we want to reach a consensus, we want to reach a shared decision. The third kind of argument that we're interested in, which I'd call an educational kind of argument, is where my aim is for us to grow. So I don't need to, I might convince you, but it's okay if I don't. We might reach an agreement, but it's okay if we don't. What we're aiming for is to grow, for me to at least understand that you have a totally different perspective from mine, and that's okay. That doesn't mean I need to change my mind, but at least I have grown in my understanding of this issue, which is not necessarily one-dimensional. So that's kind of where we start from. We start from this understanding, we're in for a healthy argument, and then the book begins the work.

There's a book by Zimmerman and Robertson called *The Case for Contention*, and it's talking about teaching controversy. And the way that he or they define controversy is that there's a disagreement, and it makes sense that there's a disagreement because it's possible to take different perspectives, and it's emotional, and it's of public concern. And so what often happens is that within Jewish Studies in Talmud and so on, we have a controversy, we have a disagreement, but it may not have come of public concern. Okay, unless I'm in a very religious and very committed state, why Avraham took Yitzchak to the *Akedah*, there are many arguments to be had, it may not be of public concern, it may not actually apply to what's going on in the world.

The challenge of Israeli studies, or issues within Judaism and issues outside of Judaism, is when you're dealing with a subject which needs to be taught over which there's disagreement, and people are getting very worked up about it, and it applies to what's going on in the world. How do you teach that kind of maximal controversy in the classroom? How does the teacher cope with that, without either getting slammed by the head teacher or slammed by the parents or by the kids? That's a different kind of skill. And that's the skill that we're interested in nowadays. And the skill that we have a feeling is more and more important.

One approach to a different educational methodology is that you need to train educators in order to use it, and that has incredible value. And there's a danger of an ambiguous investment, because quite often, there's a lot of turnover in the Jewish world in educators. So I may invest a year or two in my teachers, and then one year later, he or she is no longer in the profession. And so there's a limit to how or that there are great challenges in expanding the reach.



The other approach is to say that, for example, like, you know, babies have these little toys like where you end up trying to fit in a square-shaped thingy into a triangle-shaped hole. That's an educational tool that the parent doesn't need to be an expert in child development in order to enable their kid to play with it. And the kid will learn through that tool. So what we're now investigating and researching with the funding of Jim Joseph Foundation, is that we're now researching to what extent can the book be like that toy, that the book reaches your classroom or the book reaches your home, and it's sufficient for you to already begin practicing having these kinds of arguments, that because the stories themselves complexify something which is seemingly just a black and white kind of issue, that it leads you into those these conversations without necessarily having the training. But that's one of the things that we're checking out now.

We have funding for the next two years to research what makes for a healthy argument. How can we define it and recognize it? And then how can we teach towards it? And in particular, do we need, does there have to be a facilitator of these discussions? Or are we better leaving the students to argue amongst themselves?

There's the work of, I am forgetting her name, the book *The Political Classroom*, talks about the way that we create, the way that we educate towards civically engaged young people, is that they must spend at least 20% of their lesson talking to each other, not necessarily talking to the teacher, which is of great value and is a great teaching method, but in order to develop active civic folks, be they involved in Jewish life, Israel engagement, or American life altogether, or Canadian life altogether, they need to spend 20% of the time talking amongst each other. So we're also checking that out – to what extent does it need a teacher or an adult involved. Or can we just let them get on with it with the stories?

We're working with a research firm, and it's looking like there are kind of two stages to the research. We're beginning the research right now, to clarify what is the structure that we need to test. And so we're going around working with young adults with b'nai mitzvah age and high school age, running a workshop, working with two stories. And in each case, we're checking variables. So we're going to check what happens if I'm sitting in the argument that they're having, and what happens if I'm sitting outside, and they're having it on their own? What's the difference if there's a facilitator? What's the difference between having the story or using simply an article from a news headline? What's the difference between my teaching the information before you have the argument, or teaching the information after you have the argument? All these different, oh, and also, we're now coming up with stories which are specific to American life to see what's the difference when there's something which is of great emotional concern to somebody in their life or something to do with Israel. So constantly, and obviously checking out how it happens at different ages. That is stage one – is to clarify what's our sort of ideal structure of this one-off workshop. And then we'll be going into research probably much more



quantitative. What's the dosage? Is there a difference between having one session or four sessions? And all these various other areas.

So I guess the main thing is we're very interested in people getting hold of the book and letting us know how it goes. So for those who already have the book, please do get in touch with us and let us know what you're using, what's working, what's not working. We're very keen to be an open source on this material. We're not the only organization that works in bridge building negotiation arguments stuff, and we're doing a lot of reading, and we constantly, we're sharing this out because we're learning along the way as well.

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.