



## 11 - Keystones: Developing Future Educators with Rabbi Yaakov Green (March 2024)

*Rabbi Yaakov Green*  
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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 Yaakov Green from Maimonides School in Boston on developing enthusiastic and eager new Judaic teachers through mentorship and opportunities to learn and grow.

Rabbi Yaakov Green:

Our big idea that I wanted to talk about today is we started having conversations even before I started on the clock this summer with a few administrators and a bunch of lay leaders that were very excited about the possibility of trying to invest in bringing more *ruach* (spirit), more *dugmaot ishit*, more personal role models, that have a youthful energy and an excitement for Judaism, to the students of Maimonides, especially in the Upper School: the high school, and the middle school. And that idea, I would say, married an idea that I've been thinking about for a very long time so that when I got to town, it seemed like the perfect opportunity to mesh, and the idea I wanted to see us do was take Maimonides, which really was, you know, first in the game when it comes to Jewish Day Schools back in 1937, and for a long time has been this flag-bearing, standard bearer of schools for Modern Orthodoxy in the world, and see, once again, if we can create a pathway for Jewish educational excellence, professional Jewish educational excellence, excellence through the streets of Brookline, Massachusetts, through the halls of Maimonides school.

We wanted to create a program that would maybe, I don't want to say kill two birds with one stone, but accomplish both of those feats together – bring in some young talent, bring in some energy and some excitement and some youthful exuberance that demonstrates how alive Judaism is and can be, and have these young talents actually be also very excited and



interested in potentially going into the field professionally, going into Jewish education professionally. Out of that whole big idea, our first annual cohort of Maimonides Fellowship was born.

And then the Maimonides Fellowship started off with the idea that we would have six talented cohort members who would come six weekends out of the year from Thursday evening for a *mishmar* (extra-curricular learning) program, where our students volunteer to stay after school for food and Torah learning, and then through a *Shabbaton*, and then they'd head back to their various, whether it's colleges or graduate school programs, on Sunday.

We didn't know how many applicants we would get. We didn't know if it would take off. This is a paid fellowship, so we definitely dangled a little carrot in front of them. But for six spots, we had 20 respondents, 20 applicants – quality, high-quality applicants – graduate students, multi-degreed graduate students, undergrad students with years of camp experience and already in the role of informal Jewish education or formal Jewish education. And from those 20, we tried to whittle it down to six, and we ended up with eight spectacular, high caliber, highly talented students.

And these amazing, amazing individuals have already been to our campus for a weekend. Our second one is coming up shortly, at least at the time of this recording – I don't know how many we will have done by the time of airing. And it is just amazing to see the immediate impact, watching them interact with our students, and the idea is not only just the *avirah* (atmospheric) impact and the *ruach* impacts, but that Friday is a day dedicated to them, so that they're going to be learning with us and through their experience.

They come to our school on Friday, and they are pairing themselves up with master teachers in our hallways, in our classrooms. They are observing them and asking questions and getting feedback about why those teachers, those master educators, made the choices they did. And they will also be given the opportunity to present their own mini lessons and then receive feedback as well. They're getting used to and familiar and comfortable with I think one of the cornerstones of quality Jewish educational improvement which is the feedback loop, which is really that it's okay to be observed, it's okay to get critiqued and to get used to that right out of the gate, when everything is *tabula rasa*, when there's only humility to build on, those are the foundations that make for quality, excellent Jewish educators.

And then in addition, there's a little bit of a *shiur klali* (general Torah session), there's a little bit of a borrowing from some of the best and brightest minds in education from the greater Boston area, of which there is a lot, since Boston is kind of the mecca of higher education, as well as connections that we have with Jewish educators across North America that can readily come



and present whether via Zoom or in person, if it's Boston, to these cohort members for some of the best minds that are out there. These eight students get a very intimate session, learning about some of the really foundational ideas when it comes to Jewish education and educational leadership as a construct.

So far, it's taken off, and we, please God, expect this fellowship to be around for many, many years. And, please God, we'll just grow the field. And the idea is, not only should these experiences be amazing, they should consider a field in Jewish education as a profession. They should consider that the field of Jewish education expands beyond the tri-state area, if I can get on my soapbox. And that maybe some of these will even come back and get hired at Maimonides School in Brookline, Massachusetts.

At the end of each weekend, we have our cohort members fill out digital surveys so that we can track our progress and receive, not only we want to talk the talk, but walk the walk. So our teachers are going to be listening to feedback from these cohort members, and these cohort members are going to be listening to feedback from these teachers. We want to demonstrate that we are also listening to our fellows' feedback about how we're doing on the program. And we have, we are under no illusion that year one is going to be as great as year seven of this cohort program. In addition to an ongoing check in, that is formal, as well as kind of the informal conversations that we'll have between sessions, we are going to be talking and measuring how interested or excited are they in their next step.

I think success for us as a program would look like at some point in the not too distant future – two, three, four years from now, five years from now – when hiring administrators in day schools across North America see the Maimonides Fellowship on some aspiring educator's resume, they say, "Whoa, timeout, this resume rises to the top of the Indeed stack because that demonstrates that they've gone through a practicum in Jewish education and Jewish educational leadership." We want Maimonides to be a pitstop along the journey of the best Jewish educators in the country, in North America, in the world. That's audacious and maybe a little bit less humble than we would want to sound, but I think we need audacious dreams because we need to solve this teacher crisis – our people depend on it.

We're looking to find the best and the brightest, and we want educators out there to want our fellows. Please God, you know, the best ones will maybe come back to Boston, but we really want the best and the brightest to want this fellowship and then be wanted out in the field. I think that's going to be one of the very factual tangibles that will result in saying, "Yes, this program is being successful."



When we were talking about combining those kinds of two big ideas that we both kind of came to the table both, you know, the rest of the team and myself, we knew that we wanted the short term goals and the long term goals. The long term goal is to place that big bet that some of these people might come back to be Jewish educators professionally and ideally come back to Boston. The short term goal was, the same way that youth groups and camp benefit from that level of interaction with somebody who is not that far off from where the students of the middle school and the high school are, there's a different type of energy that is brought to bear when you're talking to a camp counselor or when you're talking to a *madrichah* (counselor) or advisor from NCSY or Bnei Akiva, BBYO, all the different Shabbatonim kind of thing. And, admittedly, my soapbox that I love to talk about the most is I came into the world of formal education from the world of informal ed, and if I ever get the chance, if my if my board is listening, if I ever get the chance to go back to school for a doctorate, that will be my thesis – will be the nexus in the value of how informal and formal education really are married, and they bleed into each other beautifully.

So the idea that's the benefits of the informal educator at that young age, that energizing elements, have that be a wave and injection of excitement and role modeling for our Shabbatonim, for our informal education elements of a school year at Maimonides, we wanted that right now for our students. It just so happened that as we were interviewing our cohort, we actually, and you know, as I'm saying it out loud right now, maybe we should have involved students in our interviewing process. We didn't, but we had a very robust interview process and application, video content they had to submit, essays – it was really robust. It turns out that many of our cohort members knew many of our students from camps, from youth groups, so there really already were some of those connections, and, thank God, it felt okay, *baruch shekivanu* (praise God for our right direction), like we got it right. The right people were getting into the program that already we know are having a direct impact in their roles as informal educators, so let's have that kind of talent and excitement be now brought into the school. Let's not wait for the crown jewel of Jewish education (camp), let's bring that energy into the day school world as well into the four walls, or many more walls of a Jewish Day School experience during the 10 months of the school year, and not have to wait for an occasional Shabbaton, for a youth group, or a two-month or a one-month summer program. Let's do it right now. Let's marry the both right now. That's the short term benefit. And the long term benefit we spoke about before, and we're trying to, I would say, get both of those at the same time.

As a school administrator, when I'm interviewing candidates for teacher positions, I always talk to administrators that are also interviewing, either with me or on their own, and then I also talk to the candidates that for a teaching position, there really is an art to teaching, and then there's a science to teaching. And art to teaching is the love of children, you have the personality that wants to and is good at working with kids. The science of teaching, there are degrees for that,



and there are programs that help teach that, and there are books about that. And some people have gone through those programs, and they make for fantastic candidates. And some people haven't yet, but they have the art down. And then there are people that have gone through the science programs, but don't really have the art. The art of teaching is much harder to teach and to train. The science of teaching, you can work with, especially when someone is open to feedback. I would say that two of the major components that we were looking for, and that I think are echoed in who we look for for faculty members, are: do they get kids? Do they enjoy spending time with children? Are they looking to impact a child's life in a positive, healthy, loving, nurturing way?

If they're an artist when it comes to Jewish education, as opposed to a scientist, I'm looking for the art first. I'm looking for the camp people. I'm looking for the NCSY, the Bnei Akiva people, the BBYO-experience people. I'm looking for people that want and get children. And I think a lot of times some of those people gravitate towards informal education. The other piece that I think we're really looking for is someone who is open to feedback. You don't want someone coming in so slick that they know all the answers already because then you have to actually break down some of the barriers to feedback, and that's a very difficult task. You don't want someone who's coming in fully baked; you want someone coming in who is ready to learn, ready to roll up their sleeves, and wants feedback, even the critique. Those are two fantastic elements that make for great core members and great teachers.

And I think beyond that, we were looking for ideally candidates that had either a direct passion for already, or an interest in possibly, Jewish education as a professional field. There were some candidates that we had that were fantastic. They were the artists already. They haven't done the science. The one candidate I'm thinking of off the top of my head, amazing candidate, the only thing they didn't have going for them, actually the only two things that didn't have going for them were – we had so many amazing candidates, and this candidate wants to be a world -famous doctor someday, which is an amazing mission and an amazing, you know, like a passion-driven mission to have for one's life. It's just not what this cohort is about. If we didn't have other candidates of that high caliber that also were open to or wanted *davka* (precisely) to be Jewish educators, he would have made a fantastic cohort member, and, who knows, maybe on the side, and while being a life-saving doctor, he could also be a Jewish educator (there are stranger ideas out there in the world). But, for this cohort member we, for this cohort I should say, we had so many high-caliber candidates that also really were open to where we already know they want to be a Jewish educator. And you can't hope for more than that. Those are the three things. It's the desire to be open to or desire to be in Jewish education, and a willingness and an openness to hearing feedback and wanting critique. And then lastly, understanding the art of teaching; science of teaching can come later. If they have that, it's a cherry on top. The science can come later, the art's got to be there.



I will add that I have lived in a lot of different cities now. They call it the Jewish Day School movement for a reason. I've been around, we've moved. And I also spent a long time living in the New York area, my wife is from New York. And I would say this: to all of the aspiring Jewish educators out there, please consider leaving the tri-state area, not because the tri-state area doesn't need amazing Jewish educators, but they have a huge wealth of amazing, amazing *Yiddin* (Jews) living within that area. They have, I know they're probably going to all hate me for saying this, there are people there, and you can be so much more impactful in smaller communities that need you that much more pronouncedly, than some of the schools that are potentially only a couple of zip codes away from our parents or our in-laws. I know that sounds a little harsh, but I want you all to consider, whoever's listening to this, think about making a massive impact with the Jewish people, especially those Jewish people that do not live in some of the communities that you are most used to traveling on the LIRR or from Penn Station or on the subway.

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).