



## 5 - Keystones: Slowing Things Down and Looking Inside with Yehuda Chanales (September 2023)

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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 Yehuda Chanales from Lifnai Vlifnim on helping students focus on growth through slowing things down and through looking inside themselves to become more self-aware.

Yehuda Chanales:

My colleagues and I were constantly asking ourselves, like, "What can we be doing to shift the Torah learning, the Jewish learning that's happening for our students, from being just another class, from being something that's about texts and translation and grades, to make sure that it's something that really is building their identity? And it's something that they're connecting with in deep ways?"

And that was a question that was behind a number of different PD initiatives that we went through over a few years, starting with curriculum work and working with the JTS Standards and Benchmarks project, a phenomenal program. I continue to work on pedagogy and asking ourselves the question of, "Okay, well, maybe if we just change the types of questions that we're asking students, and how we give tests and the types of projects that we're giving them? So maybe that will make the difference."

And, and those things did. Meaning, thinking very carefully about what we're teaching and why it matters and how we're going to teach students.





What Reb Dov taught us, and what now I have the privilege of trying to bring to schools across North America, is that besides the letter and the content, the substance of what we're teaching students, there's something else that's happening in the classroom too. Call it more spiritual, call it – he likes to call it the *aish lavana*, the white fire. There's a famous saying that the Torah is written with black letters – a black fire and a white fire. The black fire is the letters, and the white fire is the spacing between those letters.

And so Reb Dov helped us see that in order to really have an impact on students' identity, in order for the words – all that all those black letters that are that are floating in the air between the teacher and the student and the writing and their talking – there's something else that you need, there's a certain culture, a certain environment, a certain presence, a certain trust, a certain willingness to bring themselves to the learning that students need.

And it's not just students. And that's kind of been one of the most powerful parts of this work. It's not just students; it's teachers. Because if we really want to create an environment in our schools, where there's real personal and religious growth that's happening through the learning that takes place, the relationships that are there, then teachers need to be engaged in that process too. And teachers need to feel like they're growing, and they're learning, and they're connecting with each other.

So, practically, thanks to the support of the JEIC, it started as a bunch of Fuchs Mizrahi teachers visiting Israel and participating in the seminar and became the Lifnai V'Lifnim program.

So essentially, what we're trying to do is to create a space in schools where we can slow things down a little bit, either for teachers or for students, where there's a space that is not about accomplishing anything specific. It's not about learning a particular text. It's not about moving through a curriculum or assessing in a particular way. It's simply a space where people can, and protocols encourage, students and teachers to look inside, to become more self aware, to share what's going on in their inner worlds with their classmates, where they can connect in much deeper ways with each other. And, ultimately, by connecting more deeply with each other, they can also learn how to connect with the text and the Torah that they're learning.

Part of Reb Dov's argument is that, let's say talking about prayer, right, that we are engaged in too much – he calls it "aboutism," where we like to talk about things instead of actually doing them. So we talk about prayer, or we talk about God, instead of actually creating experiences to talk to Him. And then if we want students or adults to learn how to talk to God, they first have to



learn how to talk to each other and how to talk to themselves. Which means that we need to proactively create spaces and ways for people to learn how to listen in deep, empathetic ways. And for people to learn how to speak in authentic and vulnerable ways.

And when you are able to bring yourself to the learning in that way – to connect with your classmates, to connect with your teacher in a personal and deep way, then you also can connect with what Avraham is saying in Bereishit or what Rashi is saying or what a Gemara is saying or what a text in Jewish philosophy is saying. Because you're not looking at that text as something that is out there. But it's something that I'm in dialogue with, it's something that I'm talking to, that has something to say to me, and that I have something to say back to it.

And so that's kind of like the overarching vision.

How do we do that?

So mostly it's through a weekly meeting that has different names in some of the different schools. The classic name is what we call *Lev HaShavua*, which means the heart of the week. And it's supposed to designate for students that this is a time when we're focusing on the heart, and we're focusing on our emotions, our feelings, our inner world. And so students sit in a circle (already different from the way the desks and the rows that they're used to sitting in the rest of the week). And the first step is what we call *brachah rishonah* – Is everybody kind of just being present? Taking a check in of where they're at. What's going on for them that day? Hearing other people's stories, moving out of the rush of running from class to class to class to class, taking a step back from thinking about the math test that they have next period, right, to being able to think a little bit more in a little more reflective way.

That then is followed by some type of reflective learning, either related to *parshah* or *middot* or *tefillah*, where students reflect and think about something themselves, will discuss it with other people, and will share with the group.

And it can conclude with a presentation by someone called the *parnas* or the *parnasit*, where a student or in the faculty group a teacher, will simply talk about themselves with the group. They'll share a little bit about their backgrounds, a little bit about their own story, something that others may not know about them. You know, whether it's about their family, or about why they (if they are teachers) went into the field of education, or what they love about what they do or what excited them that particular week or what they're worried about.



Or for students, it's about, you know, I have the privilege of doing this with senior girls who have a lot of different things on their mind about where they're going and what they're going to do, what they want to do, what they want to do next. So they'll start by talking about themselves, their family, their background, something that they're passionate about. And they'll end by talking, by sharing a dilemma about something that's on their mind.

And the goal is not to solve anyone's problems. The protocol really encourages students to reflect back what they're hearing, to listen deeply to each other, and to gain a deeper appreciation of, "Oh, there's someone else who's also going through stuff, either similar to me or different from me, and I can better appreciate the people who are in the room with me." And when we can create that deeper bond in the classroom between the people that are there, and students recognize that they're having a conversation with friends that they now know on a deeper level and a teacher that they now appreciate on a deeper level, that changes the type of conversation they can have when they're talking about Avraham or Moshe or Abaye or Rava or *halachah* or *emunah*, all of it.

And it's been incredible to see the impact that this work has had. We are now in our second year of the school cohort program that was launched last year, thanks to support from the JEIC, and now this year, thanks to support from the JEIC and UnitED. And we now have nine schools that are part of the program – co-ed schools, all-girls schools, schools in the New York area, schools in Toronto, a school in Oakland – really building across North America. And it's been incredible to see the transformative impact that creating a different kind of space can have on teachers and then also on students.

The feedback that we've been getting from teachers and students about how much they look forward to these weekly meetings and how much they've learned about themselves and about their colleagues or about their friends and their students. And how it's such a break from the rush of the week and the intensity of what is a middle school or high school experience. Even for that, it would be worth it, but we're also starting to see how that starts to change what happens in class.

I interviewed a couple of students last year. One student said that, you know, she was an eighth grader, and she said, "Without our *Lev HaShavua*, I don't think I would have been comfortable raising my hand in class. And because I now feel closer to my peers, to my friends, and I feel comfortable sharing what I want to share or responding to text. I'm not worried." Another student said, "I'm not worried that I'm going to, you know, I don't have to read Hebrew, so I'm not worried that I'm not going to do that. I'm less scared to bring myself and who I am and my strengths and



my weaknesses to the learning that I'm doing in class.” Another student I interviewed said that, you know, their *Lev HaShavua* led to so many deeper conversations in the lunchroom amongst friends because now the conversations are not just about, “Okay, what are you doing tonight? What are you doing this weekend? What are you doing next year?” It's about, “Oh, well, how are you experiencing this? What's going on for you? How does that make you feel? And they're learning how to ask different kinds of questions that really goes to Lifnai Vlifnim, really goes more inside.

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).