

Claire Darmstadter

Hi, everybody, I'm joined today by Kendra Sager, Director of Midrasha Hebrew High School in Madison. Thanks for taking a couple minutes to chat with me.

Kendra Sager

No problem.

Claire Darmstadter

So it would be great if you could just give us a brief overview of your personal education and linguistic background, and then maybe how you got into your current position here?

Kendra Sager

Yeah, so I guess I have been interested in Jewish education since I was in it myself. And from middle school and high school, I wanted to be a teacher's assistant, but I always thought of it as sort of a separate part of my life. And I actually went to art school, and became a graphic designer. And after a few years of sort of teaching and tutoring on the side, somebody said maybe you should go to grad school for this. And I was like, that's enough. But two masters degrees later, I guess, if that was the right call. So I have a master's in Jewish professional studies from Spertus in Chicago and an executive master's in religious education from Hebrew Union College, which has three campuses, and it was a remote program. So I was on all the campuses well, though, technically, I think my degree's from New York. So yeah, I have been interested in Hebrew and Jewish Studies, for a long time I grew up going to Jewish summer camp. And Hebrew is a big part of the curriculum there, it's an immersive experience, you learn Hebrew as part of your day as a camper until you get to the last unit in high school where the entire unit is conducted in Hebrew. And a lot of the counselors are from Israel, and, and in the next year, the way it's sort of set up, you spend the summer in Israel. So by that point, my Hebrew was pretty decent. And I just continued learning in college and beyond. And I'm always trying to continue my own Hebrew learning. I have my own tutor. And I've done lots of different adult education programs, etc. So, I was the Director of Education at a, a large congregation in Chicago. And when I moved to Wisconsin with my husband, I moved into a more administrative role for the congregation here. And then the director of Midrasha opened up. It's not a full time position, we have in non-COVID times more like 50 to 60 students in grades 8 through 12. And Hebrew is offered as a supplementary piece, even to that program. So about a third of those students enroll in the Hebrew program, and that program is really focused on modern conversational Hebrew, whereas their education up till now may have been more focused on prayers and decoding.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure. And so you kind of mentioned right, like the intention, or the purpose might not be as similar to a typical language program where they're not necessarily going to walk away fluent or having full capacities in the language, but it's very geared towards specific uses and instances. So with this in mind, how do you approach language teaching? Is it focused on... I know, you talked about a balance between love and literacy. So is there a higher emphasis on like, reading and writing or speaking and listening? Do you teach grammar explicitly? Or, so how do you --

Kendra Sager

So in a traditional supplementary Hebrew program, there is a goal to sort of get kids to get a B'nai mitzvah, so to be able to lead a service. And so often the focus of Hebrew in the younger grads is on the prayers and the words that are appropriate to prayer. And our program starts in eighth grade, which is after that happens. They have two hours of Hebrew instruction a week, right? So that is not enough, we know to become fluent, that's not reasonable. What we do is we have actually tapped into the professor who teaches Hebrew at UW, so we understand what UW learns. And so we have taken one year of their curriculum and spread it over five for our students. And so what that means is that by the time they finish high school, they have completed one year of college-level Hebrew. So most of our kids come in with a pretty good foundation, they have a very basic vocabulary, they know the alphabet, but this is to get them to feel that they speak Hebrew. And they really, they are able to speak sort of in a very basic way that sentence structure, but they are able to speak by the time they complete our program, so we do try to balance reading, writing and speaking. Right now we're on Zoom. And so writing is sort of impractical. It's really more reading and speaking. And there is they did do grammar, there is a focus on that, what we've sort of try to take logical sets of, of vocabulary, like they might learn how to order in a restaurant. So they'll learn the words for menu and waiter, and may I have, and thank you, and receipts and all of those sorts of things, along with we did a lesson every year of like, what are your favorite pizza toppings, right? Because it is a very practical thing. If you're going to go to Israel, you need to know how to order pizza, you need to also know, for example, that corn is a popular pizza topping in Israel, right? So you got to decide, do you like that or not? And what is the word for that so that you're not stunned by it. We tried to take a practical aspect, you know, what are the objects of the room around me? And then by the time they are seniors, they can do past tense and future tense as well as present tense. So they get pretty far. And I sat in on class last week where the advanced teacher gave them all the instructions in Hebrew. And asked in Hebrew, *Guys, you understand?* And they all said, *Yep, we got it.* And were able to complete the assignment. And that class is conducted completely in Hebrew. So that's coming from kids who started in eighth grade, like, kind of knowing the alphabet and being able to chant that Haftarah, which is another prayer they needed to learn for their B'nai Mitzvah, but not necessarily knowing what the words meant. So I think that they're able to accomplish, I think, a reasonable amount, considering the constraints.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure. And like you kind of mentioned, this isn't their main academic home, they have, you know, regular high school that they're going to in addition, so how do you approach grading and assessment and feedback? I know, there's like an option to get credit through the local Madison area high school. So does that necessitate grading? Or how does that work?

Kendra Sager

Um, no, it hasn't actually, they don't require that we grade. The classes are really small. And so really, what we do is they have an assessment at the beginning of the year so that we can figure out what level they're in. And so we can sort of track their progress that way, but we don't really give them grades. They are motivated because they get credit. And so that is mostly based on

attendance. They have to attend I think, like two thirds of classes to get credit. Which is not a problem. Our Hebrew kids are pretty dedicated. They really enjoy it, they're doing it, they're already — Midrasha is a voluntary program. And Hebrew is an additional optional elective within that. So it's really kids who are there by choice and motivated? And that certainly helps. Yeah, yes. I think I lost track of the question.

Claire Darmstadter

Not much grading is the main summary, right?

Kendra Sager

Yes, not really grading.

Claire Darmstadter

And so you talked a little bit about COVID and how things have had to change and pivot; it's the most used word of the year. Is there anything that you've noticed with teaching online that you might carry through into the future? Or is it like, we want to leave this all in the past? This is not that helpful towards language acquisition?

Kendra Sager

No, I mean, the use of technology has actually been really great. Because before we used to, wheel in a TV and a laptop, to show a video, which was like, sort of ridiculous, just because of the resources that were available to us in the building. And now, the teachers can just screen share. And so they've done a lot with watching videos, and playing games and being able to share material. So there are a lot of benefits to being online. But as I mentioned, it is harder for them to get practice writing, because the teacher can't see as they're sort of moving their hand. And so I think something is lost there, for sure with the writing. But that's that doesn't have to be the focus for right now. And I will get back to that. And so it's actually, I think, working pretty well, to do this online. And I've actually heard a lot of my colleagues who — it's less common to do a program like this, it's in high school, most of my colleagues teach, like fourth through seventh grade, but a lot of them are considering staying online. There's some pros and cons to that. I actually think like being in class and working in small groups and being able to come back together and being able to hear what's being said, there's obviously some benefit to that and language learning, but we're adapting.

Claire Darmstadter

Thank you so much for chatting. Your school just seems like such a warm and welcoming place. On the website, all the courses seem incredible. So I think people really will just find your insight super interesting and helpful. The goal here is to celebrate multilingualism. And in closing, I don't want to put you on the spot, but if there's anything in Hebrew that's like a saying or a significant word, or anything that you want to kind of leave us with that do you think is particularly meaningful?

Kendra Sager

I guess what I'm thinking about right now, just with the pandemic, and everybody has sort of waiting for what's to come. So there is an expression in Hebrew that says *gam zeh ya'avor* like this, too shall pass basically. Which is appropriate for both sad times and happy times to remember that everything is momentary and fleeting. And that there's always change on the horizon.

Claire Darmstadter

So, thank you so much. I appreciate all your time and have a great rest of your day.

Kendra Sager

Yeah, thanks, you too!