



## 9 - Keystones: Learning Torah through Gardening with Sara Just-Michael (January 2024)

*Sara Just-Michael*  
*Executive Director*  
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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 Sara Just-Michael from Grow Torah on using a garden as a key access point to Torah and Judaism.

Sara Just-Michael:

At Grow Torah, we do experiential, environmental Torah education through hands-on learning in school gardens where we have a lesson for every week's *parashah* [Torah portion] and every *chag*, every holiday. And it's a lot of fun. So we take what students are already learning in the classroom and learn hands on in the garden by doing *middot*-based lessons, and we have Grow Torah's four core values that get woven into all of our lessons also, which is incubating *emunah* [belief], compassion for creatures, stewarding the earth, and *tzedakah* [righteous giving]. So all of our programs revolve around those four things.

Our main program is we go to schools, and we have our *shorashim* [roots] program where we come to your school, and we teach. We build a garden, and we teach in your garden. Or the other version of that program is the *anafim* program where we train educators at schools. So that one has helped us to branch out (*anafim* means branches), and we've branched out to schools now in Chicago and Maryland and Atlanta and Dallas. And that was with help through a grant from the Covenant Foundation.

Our main program is the school garden-based programs, and then we also have *Tu b'Shevat* workshops, since *Tu b'Shevat* is a busy season for us, you know, and we have a farm camp for two weeks at the end of the summer between the end of camps and the beginning of schools, fully outdoors on the farm. We help at the farm, and we also make our own *havdalah* candles and use natural tie-dye to make our camp shirts, all kinds of fun activities. And then we also



have a college-age program, which is our internship that we call our “inchwormship”, just for a fun name.

Our goals are to get students learning Torah in a different way – outside of the classroom and hands-on. Some of that looks like, for example, learning about the *melachot* [prohibited categories of work] of Shabbat – instead of just learning it in the classroom, we actually plow and sow and winnow and thresh and use the first 11 of the 39 *melachot* to learn about the process of making bread, which are things that students are often learning at school anyway. But they get their hands dirty while doing it. So goals are to have fun while learning Torah, to make it experiential, and so it's very open to different kinds of learners, and to have students fall in love with Hashem's earth and get excited about caring for the environment.

We do use text in some situations, but not all. Some of our school gardens even have *psukim* [Torah verses] hanging on the walls that we can refer to. We also have sometimes printed the different *b'samim* [spices] *brachot* [blessings] on the planters so that the students are learning which plants have different *b'samim brachot* because there's four of them, and often “*boreh minai b'samim*,” [blessed be the One who created types of spices] especially in Ashkenaz schools, are often the only one that's learned. There's not specific goals that we want them to walk out learning, like being able to quote, but we want them to feel more connected that their Judaism is everywhere. We have, we talk about “*mah rabu* [“how great”...are the things you have made, God] moments” a lot in our gardens, that they can come in and see, even if they're not looking at grand mountains, but even just seeing a seed sprouting, is a way to notice the beauty in Hashem's world and recognizing that.

Students go home talking about what they did in the garden. And to us, if they've spent a whole day at school, and they remember the half hour or 20 minutes that they spent in the morning in the garden at the end of their day, that is a data point for us, that parents tell us that they hear about what happens in the school gardens. But also we, you know, our camp, for example. It's five years old now, and it's doubled in size every year. That's a pretty good step for us to show that campers are returning, and that word is spreading, and that people are excited about the program, and also the fact that we've never recruited a school. We came to Prizmah this year for the first time to recruit, but all the schools that we have (the 25 schools that are our partner programs), we've never recruited before. It's all been word of mouth, which means that there's people who are enjoying and are excited by what we're doing and sharing it with others.

Ideally, we would love for every Jewish day school to have a garden. It doesn't have to be a Grow Torah garden. We do partner with other JOFEE organizations and JOFEE groups – JOFEE is “Jewish Outdoor Food, Farming, and Environmental Education”. I did a JOFEE fellowship. And so we actually, we came to visit Ikar Farm in, I think it was just before I joined



Grow Torah in 2018, just to see what they're doing and see if we can do things together. And we became friends. So so far, that's where we're at.

The reason we have so many programs is because we think we need...the Jewish day schools are what's shaping the Jewish future. And so instead of this being a program just individualized for specific students who are into it, we feel very passionate that it's coming as part of a school program because that way, it really becomes part of the community and part of what they're learning is that nature is part of Judaism. So much of our *tefillot* [prayers] revolve around it, our holiday cycles revolve around nature, and we're, right – *Chag HaAviv*, *Chag HaAsif* [Spring Holiday, Gathering Holiday, which are alternative names for Pesach and Sukkot] – like we are a pretty agricultural people. And so sort of bringing that back into their Judaism is like, it makes a lot of sense, actually.

You know, I guess something that's really special is when students who, now that we're already a few years old, we're having people who have done our programs as students come back to become our interns, and now one of them actually just joined our staff. And so that feels very special to have people who do the full pipeline of all of our programs. But we're also starting to do adult education now. And instead of just students bringing the lessons home, we've had parents asking if they can have Grow Torah opportunities. And so we're about to have our first adult Zoom *shiur* [session]. We just had our first harvest feast for adults, which was like our version of a gala. It was on a farm. It was beautiful. The attire was “farm chic,” and everyone had a lot of fun. It was just before Rosh Hashanah. And so we had “pick herbs and infuse your own honey with the herbs that they picked on the farm”. So they got to have the hands-on experiential education of interacting with the plants and learning about them and then making it part of their Jewish practice. So we're moving into adult education also. We're just getting our toes wet there. But we're excited that, there's even just being here, there's so much buzz about like, people are coming up to us and saying, “We heard about you, someone else told us we need to stop by,” and it's, I don't know, it feels like we're excited, and people are excited for us. So that's a lot of fun.

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).