

Beth Tzedec offers kids a new way to learn Hebrew

Beth Tzedec's Congregational School in midtown Toronto isn't your mother's Hebrew school.

There's no more boring recitations of Hebrew or endless drills about Jewish holidays. Instead, principal Daniel Silverman has reformed the curriculum to reflect an experience- and activity- based model of learning.

"We're not just taking the school model and changing what subject kids learn, and doing it on off hours. We're very different than what things used to be like 20, 30, 40 years ago," he says.

"We make sure that everything that we do is centred on, not what I want my students to learn, [or] what I want the students to get, but – how are my students going to experience this? What is going to be their take [on] how I'm going to present this material to them?"

Silverman accomplishes this through physical movements, props and games so that "they are beginning to develop a Hebrew vocabulary in a purely oral way," he says.

"And so, in a few years down the road when we actually sit down with them to learn how to read Hebrew, and how to write Hebrew, the content that they're



learning they already know."

One such way assignments reflect this is through baking. The children will have an ingredient list and recipe for chocolate chip cookies in Hebrew, which they will have to correctly translate before being able to eat and distribute the baked goods.

The end result is being able to place Hebrew in context, which will be more meaningful for them.

"When they learn all this Hebrew vocabulary it isn't just in this vacuum," Silverman says. "It is all happening in real time and in a relevant and authentic way."

The kids aren't bored or staring idly at the clock, watching the seconds tick by, like you may have done in Hebrew school. Instead, the youngsters at Beth Tzedec think Hebrew school is fun.

"They are learning, but they are also learning in a way that is engaging and fun and is connecting to that subject. Not in a 'This is what you have to know' way, but in a 'here's what we think this is what you want to know.'"

Silverman does this through the support of his faculty, who are all dedicated to helping children learn in the modern world.

"Here's the 21st-century aspect of it,"

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he says. "As a teacher, you incorporate technology, you incorporate music, you incorporate art and it makes for a really robust and full experience for all of our students."

Beth Tzedec also offers options for busy parents with children in grades 3 to 7 who may not want to fight through Toronto traffic on a Wednesday afternoon. It offers a web-conferencing class where students can log on from their own home.

"We understand that we serve a wide geographic range and people have different and busy schedules, and parent can't always get their kids to our site at a specific time," he says.

Come see for yourself at Beth Tzedec's open house at 9:45 a.m. on Sunday, March 1. ■