

Building Independent Gemara Learners

How do we help middle school students move beyond translating Gemara to truly thinking through its arguments?

For **Rabbi Ariel Schneider**, a recent graduate of the Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration and a middle school rebbe at Westchester Day School, that question inspired the development of an innovative curriculum designed to transform how students learn Gemara.

Recognizing that many students struggle not because they lack ability, but because the text itself can feel overwhelming, Rabbi Schneider developed a carefully scaffolded approach that gives students the tools to navigate any sugya with increasing confidence and independence. His curriculum demonstrates how thoughtful instructional design can make rigorous Jewish learning more accessible while maintaining high expectations for every learner.

At the heart of the curriculum is a comprehensive reference packet that organizes the language of the Gemara into functional categories—questions, answers, proofs, challenges, and other common textual structures. Rather than serving as a guide to a single masechta, the packet functions as a universal resource that students can use throughout their middle school Gemara experience. Beginning this year, it will provide a common instructional framework across grades six through eight at Westchester Day School, allowing students to build skills progressively as they encounter increasingly complex texts.

The curriculum reflects a central principle of effective teaching: scaffold learning without sacrificing rigor. Students begin with structured supports, including guided vocabulary identification and color-coded reference materials, but those supports are intentionally removed as students gain proficiency. Daily "Do Now" activities reinforce previously learned concepts while introducing new vocabulary, helping students develop automaticity through consistent practice rather than rote memorization. The ultimate goal is not simply that students recognize key terms, but that they become independent readers capable of following the flow and logic of a Gemara discussion.

Equally noteworthy is the curriculum's commitment to meeting the needs of diverse learners. Rabbi Schneider has thoughtfully incorporated differentiated supports that can be adjusted according to each student's readiness. Some students may receive targeted vocabulary cues or additional scaffolding, while others are challenged to deepen their learning through independent study of Rashi. Throughout the planning process, careful attention has also been given to accessibility, classroom routines, and reducing

unnecessary cognitive load so that students can focus their energy on understanding the Gemara itself rather than managing obstacles unrelated to the learning goal.

The curriculum also reimagines student motivation through the lens of Adam Grant's *Hidden Potential*. Grant argues that extraordinary achievement is rarely the product of innate talent. Instead, it grows from deliberate practice, supportive systems, and a commitment to continual improvement. Rather than encouraging students to compare themselves to their classmates, Grant advocates helping learners compete with the person they were yesterday.

Rabbi Schneider has incorporated this philosophy into his Gemara classroom by encouraging students to set ambitious, personal learning goals rather than measuring success against one another. Each student identifies an individual challenge from mastering Gemara vocabulary, independently punctuating a passage, to tackling increasingly difficult Rashi, and works toward that goal over time. Progress is celebrated collectively, but each student's benchmark is their own growth. In this way, students are motivated not by outperforming their peers, but by surpassing their own previous achievements.

This philosophy complements the curriculum's broader design. All the scaffolding elements, from a vocabulary packet, guided highlighting, differentiated supports, to thoughtfully structured chavruta learning, are to make meaningful growth possible. As those supports are gradually removed, students discover that success comes through persistence, reflection, and continuous improvement. The result is a classroom culture where challenge is welcomed, effort is valued, and every student is empowered to realize their own hidden potential.

Rabbi Schneider's work reminds us that the future of Jewish education depends not only on preserving our sacred texts, but on continually refining the ways we help students access them. At Azrieli, we are proud to celebrate graduates who combine educational research, reflective practice, and a deep commitment to Torah learning to enrich classrooms across our community.

Educators interested in learning more about Rabbi Schneider's curriculum or discussing its implementation are encouraged to reach out to him directly at arielschneid@gmail.com. By sharing ideas and learning from one another, we continue to strengthen Jewish education for the benefit of students across our schools.