

Spotlight: Dr. Scott Goldberg on the Science of Hebrew Reading and Research that Shapes the Field, interviewed by recent doctoral grad Dr. Tavi Koslowe

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For more than two decades, Dr. Scott Goldberg, Golda Koschitzky Chair of Jewish Education at Azrieli, has been one of the leading voices in the science of Hebrew reading. His research has shaped Hebrew literacy assessment and instruction across Jewish day schools in North America and beyond, including the MaDYK (Mivchan.Dinami.she.Yesholot.Kriah) assessment suite battery and the Even.Kriah curriculum system, currently used in more than thirty schools with more adopting in the coming school year.

This work also reflects one of Azrieli's distinctive strengths: the close collaboration between faculty and graduate students engaged in applied educational research and partnerships with schools as dynamic laboratories. Dr. Tavi Koslowe, who recently completed his doctorate under Dr. Goldberg's mentorship, sat down with him to discuss the science behind his work, the evolution of Hebrew literacy research, and how research partnerships between professors and students can help advance the field and prepare the next generation of educators and scholars.

The interview below has been lightly edited for clarity and length.

Q: You've been researching and presenting on the science of Hebrew reading for a long time. How do you describe the work to someone hearing about it for the first time?

The work sits at the intersection of multiple fields: literacy, second language development, linguistics, and language-based learning disabilities, applied specifically to Hebrew. My focus has been on understanding how children actually learn to read Hebrew as a second language, what gets in the way when they struggle, and what instruction and intervention need to look like to meet them where they are.

Reading is a complex task that depends on known basic early literacy skills including phonological awareness, oral language, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. People often say Hebrew reading is easy. I'm not entirely sure what that means, as there are real complexities in Hebrew that make it challenging for many readers. There are also important differences between Hebrew and English in how reading develops. While there are underlying universal principles, there are also particular expressions of them in different languages. For example, accuracy is much more of a marker of early English reading challenges while fluency is more so in Hebrew. Add the second language component and we cannot just assume Hebrew reading skills will develop.

A critical takeaway from decades of research is that systematic direct instruction is needed to learn to read. Immersion in language is an evidence-based practice helpful for speaking and listening. In contrast, the proficiency approach for literacy – basically, immersion alone -- translates into whole language or what is sometimes referred to as balanced literacy instruction, which is not supported by research.

What that science has translated into, over many years of research and development, are my evidence-based assessment, curricular, and instructional tools used throughout the world: the MaDYK assessment, a suite of standardized research-based assessments that help monitor the progress of all students, predicting their future reading and informing instructional interventions; and the Even.Kriah curriculum system, which as of this summer will be the only comprehensive Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 Hebrew reading curriculum that provides a school a full array of materials and instructional and interventional approaches to support all students to learn to read Hebrew within an MTSS framework, just as schools have for English literacy. More than thirty institutions are now using the Tier 1 curriculum, with more coming on board next year. Each school has an external expert coach supporting implementation. This is not about just following a program, but about building the systems, leadership, and teacher expertise. And we're also learning alongside the schools, refining and continuing to develop tools. MaDYK is the only assessment of its type globally for second language Hebrew reading. Even.Kriah is the only full literacy system for second language Hebrew based on the Science of Hebrew Reading.

For me, the bottom line has always been this: every child should be able to access the texts of our heritage unencumbered, in a way that allows them to be fully functional members of the community.

Q: You offer Azrieli Master's students a course called “The Science and Practice of Teaching Hebrew Reading.” What do you want them to take from it?

Every one of our teachers is teaching text, Chumash, Siddur, other texts. By definition, that means they are teaching reading. A teacher approaching a pasuk of Chumash, or reading the Siddur with students, is a literacy teacher, whether or not they think of themselves that way. The course is designed to support our Azrieli students in approaching that reality. Once they understand the mechanisms, that children need to hear sounds before they can read them, that vocabulary and oral language are foundational, that fluency and comprehension don't happen automatically, they begin to see their own classrooms differently.

There's almost no student who finishes the course without some level of frustration, because Hebrew reading is no longer simple to them. They start to notice how adults read,

many dysfluently. That, frankly, is an indictment of our Jewish education system. The course is also a pay-it-forward. Graduates raise their own children differently, encouraging the schools they work in to ask harder questions about why we do what we do, and they bring an evidence-based lens to Judaic instruction, not only decoding, but vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension across all the texts they teach.

Q: You've now mentored many doctoral students through this work, including me. What do you hope graduate study at Azrieli does for a student?

The number one thing we should be trying to achieve is transformation. Not checking a box and getting some letters after your name to be yotzei, but a real shift in how you encounter a topic, so that you can no longer look at a question in education without first asking what the research says. And more than that, holding the field to a reasonable standard. Saying, even as a master's student, that it isn't about what I happen to see in my school or the way I was taught. It's about what the science says, how that manifests in practice, and how we keep iterating as the science evolves.

There's a tendency for doctoral students to think their goal is to write on something they already know about, or to promote a topic they already have a view on. But what we think is not necessarily what the literature says. Doctoral and master's study should be the place where that assumption gets unsettled. The students I'm most excited to work with are the ones who are hungry and passionate about a topic, but humble enough to be changed by the process. When we are all learning and growing together, the program does its job.