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Abrams Hebrew Academy's

Rabbi Joshua Ottensoser

Inspires Jewish Pride and a Connection to Israel in Yardley

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Rabbi Joshua Ottensoser

ABRAMS HEBREW ACADEMY VETERAN BUILDS JEWISH COMMUNITY IN YARDLEY

Andrew Guckes | Staff Writer



Courtesy of Rabbi Joshua Ottensoser

Rabbi Joshua Ottensoser, associate principal of Judaic studies at Abrams Hebrew Academy, didn't exactly know what he was getting into when he first came to Abrams 30 years ago.

Then, he was just a replacement filling in for another rabbi and teacher who had slipped on some ice and needed to stay home.

"I believe it was for a week," Ottensoser said. "I guess Director Rabbi Ira Budow was happy enough with what he saw, and said 'Next year, if you'd be interested, I'd like to hire you.' The rest of it, as they say, is history."

Today, Ottensoser is one of many staff members at Abrams who has been with the school for a dozen — or, in his case — dozens of years. He started off teaching mostly fifth graders before shifting to his current role as the head of the department of Judaic studies.

"I ended up in that role. I do [still] teach a little bit, about three or four periods. But I officially oversee the Judaics department here at the school," he said.

For Ottensoser, having more of a high-level position that also includes teaching is a good mix. He enjoys working with children, and that's what got him into this realm to begin with. As long as he continues to do that, Ottensoser is happy.

"I really enjoy working with children. As I got older, before I was a senior staff member, I felt that I had a knack for it," he said. "I was doing sort of odd jobs part time in yeshivas. But then when this was full time, I said 'Let's go for this.'"

Ottensoser added that the community at Abrams is what has helped make his 30-year stint with one employer possible. Whichever side of the river the kids come from, they're welcomed into the community and become a part of the Abrams family.

"Somehow, in little Yardley, Pennsylvania, we have kids from all over. I'd say about 10% of our student body is from Yardley. We have a huge contingency from Northeast Philadelphia, we have students from Cherry Hill. We have students from Princeton and from anywhere in between," Ottensoser said. "We are a community, and it's a very warm environment over here."

At Abrams, a connection to Israel and pride in Judaism are of paramount importance. Those are things that Ottensoser is also personally incredibly passionate about.

"I would say our goal here is to give the kids a very strong connection to [Israel] and be very proud. I'd say Hashem, *Am Yisrael* and *Eretz Yisrael* are really the [tenets of the school]. We want it to be very real, not just in a theoretical sense," Ottensoser said.

As head of Judaic studies, Ottensoser is of course concerned with what kids are learning at Abrams. But he said he is also incredibly motivated to make sure that as they navigate the world outside of Abrams, their identity is something they are proud to wear on their sleeve.

"Of course we cover curriculum and we learn a lot, but our No. 1 emphasis is that when you leave here, you understand what it means to be Jewish and you're proud to be a Jew. That's really front and center of what we do. It's the *ruach* of the school," Ottensoser said.

At Abrams, Ottensoser has been able to have a monumental impact on the lives of many young Jews. He said that's a special feeling, and it's something he wants to continue to do moving forward.

"I've been here for a long time, and you look back and you think, 'Have I made a difference?' Sometimes people don't really know and it takes years, but it's very fulfilling when you're contacted by former students and kids who have gone on and are connected to the Jewish community," Ottensoser said. "I wouldn't say I'm taking credit for it, but [at] Abrams Hebrew Academy, we can confidently say that we've definitely impacted thousands of lives over the years and brought them closer and more connected to Judaism, and I'm eternally grateful I have the opportunity to do that." ■

aguckes@midatlanticmedia.com